

The Formation of the Classical *Tafsīr* Tradition

THE QUR'ĀN COMMENTARY OF AL-THA'LABI

(D. 427/1015)



BY
WALID A. SALEH

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To Ken Gerber

(1966–1999)

*Oh for a Disc to the Distance
Between Ourselves and the Dead!*

Emily Dickinson

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INTRODUCTION

QURANIC EXEGESIS IN HISTORY AND SCHOLARSHIP

Quranic commentary, the sequential verse by verse running interpretation of the Qur'ān, known in Arabic as *tafsīr*, is one of the richest of Islamic literatures.¹ The number of quranic commentaries is not only impossible to count, since many are still unedited, but also most of these commentaries are voluminous, running to thousands of pages. In contemplating *tafsīr*, one stands before a sea of writing that has been expanding for the last millennium and a half. Muslims over the centuries who read verse 31:27 of the Qur'ān, which speaks of the forest of pens and the seas of ink that must be consumed in any attempt to write down the word of God, have managed themselves to write as much. The self-declared inexhaustibility of God's word found its match in the inexhaustibility commentators saw in its meaning. One could argue that the vastness of the literature of quranic commentary is itself a cultural confirmation of the fathomlessness of the word of God.²

¹ *Tafsīr* will be used throughout this book to refer to the genre of Qur'ān commentary. Individual works of Qur'ān commentary will not be referred to as *tafsīr*, though the Arabic term allows for such a double usage.

² Verse 31:27 reads: "Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea—seven seas after it to replenish it, yet would the Words of God not be spent. God is All-hearing, All-seeing." Some commentators will argue that not only the Word of God is inexhaustible but all that is connected with it, especially its interpretation. Al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) interpretation, lengthy as it is, presupposes that the "Words of God" in verse 31:27 means God's eternal Word, both what is revealed of it (as holy texts) and what has not been revealed; see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1986), v. 21: 80–82. We read nothing concerning the meaning of the Word of God in al-Ṭabarī's remarks. Al-Tha'labī (425/1035) has an interesting sentence at the end of his interpretation. It reads: "This verse implies that the Word of God is uncreated because that which is without end to it or to what relates to it, i.e. its meaning, is uncreated." (*wa-hādhih al-āyah taqtadī anna kalāmahu, tabāraka wa-ta'ālā, ghayr makhḷūq li-anna mā lā nihāyata lahu wa-limā yata'allaqu bi-hi, ma'nāhu, fa-huwa ghayr makhḷūq*), al-Tha'labī, *al-Kaṣhif*, Veliyuddin Efendi, 132, fol. 1098b) (henceforth, VE). Al-Tha'labī seems to think that the meaning of the Word of God is also inexhaustible. By al-Qurṭubī's (d. 671/1272) time, one of the central meanings of the verse is that the interpretation of the Word of God is what is infinite. Al-Qurṭubī states that "the purpose of this verse is to make public the multitude of the meanings of the Words of God, meanings which are endless" (*wa-innamā al-gharaḍ al-ʿlām bi-kathrat ma'ānī kalimāt Allāh, wa-hiya fī nafsihā*

It is not merely its immense volume that makes this literature of interest to historians of religious thought, but also the pivotal role it has played in Islamic religious history. Quranic commentary stands at the heart of the Islamic literatures produced in any age. In it one finds reflected the concerns of every generation of Muslim intellectuals. In fact, the role of quranic commentary as the most important bearer of religious thinking has only increased during the centuries. This is no less true in our own day. Modernity, despite the disruption it caused to the other central disciplines of the Islamic religious tradition, such as law, ḥadīth, mysticism, and theology, was extremely beneficial to quranic commentary. By replacing the Sharī'ah with European legal codes and the *madrasa* college system with universities, modernity caused a rupture in the continuity of Sharī'ah and ḥadīth study, preventing them from acting as vehicles of Islamic religious developments.³ The supremacy of the Qur'ān, however, was left unchallenged. When modern Muslim intellectuals expound their religious outlooks it is usually in the form of a quranic commentary. Muhammad Abdu (d. 1905), and Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) are but two examples of many.⁴ A history of this genre is thus essential for an understanding of Islamic religious history itself.

While there have been repeated attempts at writing general histories of many of the classical Islamic literatures and institutions such as law, Sufism (mysticism), *adab* (belles lettres), and ḥadīth (prophetic traditions), still we lack a comprehensive history of quranic commentary.⁵ This should not come as a surprise; the problems encoun-

ghayr mutanāhiyah), see al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1996), v. 14: 51. Compare with *Midrash Rabbah, Song of Songs*, v. 4 (I. 2, 3–I. 3, 1), (London: The Soncino Press, 1977), 36–37, where a more or less similar image is given for the inexhaustibility of the Torah.

³ See Wael Hallaq's *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 207–254, where he discusses the disruption caused by modernity to the Islamic legal tradition. The chapter devoted to this is appropriately entitled, "Crisis of Modernity: Toward a New Theory of Law?"

⁴ For modern interpretation of the Qur'ān see: J.M.S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Interpretation (1880–1960)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961); J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974); Jacques Jomier, *Le commentaire coranique du Manār: tendances modernes de l'exégèse coranique en Egypte* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1954).

⁵ Modern Muslim scholars in the Middle East have written a large number of histories of the genre. While many reflect the doctrinal bias of their authors and are marred by methodological inconsistencies, the studies are not without merit. Muḥammad al-Dhahabī's *al-Tafsīr wa-al-mufasssīrūn* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1985) is widely used.

tered in attempting to study or present a history of quranic exegesis are legion. Foremost among them is the staggering breadth of this literature; how does one carry out a general study of the history of the genre without being drowned in the sea one is trying to fathom? What methods should one adopt? What plan should one envision in approaching the enterprise of writing such a history?

When pondering these questions, one finds that not only are many of these commentaries still unedited, and unstudied, but in many cases they are not even catalogued. One can never be sure what is being overlooked when one studies a certain historical period.⁶ Added to that are the difficulties encountered in accessing many of the most important manuscript collections. Scholarship, to which we would hope to turn for a reliable guide, leaves us in no better position. Most scholars working on *tafsīr* are mainly concerned with the early period to the detriment of the later, post-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) periods.⁷ Hence, the overall picture of the development of the literature is inevitably distorted. Finally, progress in correcting this state of affairs has been impeded by the possibly erroneous scholarly assumption, if not consensus, that the printed works we have in our hands are the most important representatives of the genre.⁸ Investigation soon forces us to admit that much of what we know about the classical period of the genre is outdated and vague, and in many ways our assumptions are not supported by evidence.

⁶ Take for example the commentator Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Mūsā b. Mardawayh (d. 410/1019) whose Qur'ān commentary was apparently very influential in the post Ibn Taymīyah stage of the tradition. There is no copy of the work; the author is not given his due as a major figure in the history of the tradition and one can only realize the significance of the work from the abundance of citations from his commentary by commentators who came centuries later. On him see al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, v. 17: 308–311; Sezgin, *GAS*, v. 1: 225; see also *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, v. 8: 38 (Ebn Mardawayh).

⁷ Jane McAuliffe in her review of the state of the literature on *tafsīr* draws attention to the privileged position the early period enjoyed among scholars: "the earliest period deserves some consideration not only for its intrinsic importance as prelude to all subsequent exegetical endeavor but also for the prolonged scholarly attention that it has attracted." *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13. Herbert Berg's *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (London: Curzon, 2000), offers an extensive review of secondary literature on early *tafsīr*.

⁸ Harris Birkeland, for example, assures us in *The Lord Guideth, Studies on Primitive Islam* (Skriptor Utgitt Av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi I Oslo, II Hist.-Filos. Klasse. 1956. No. 2), p. 136, that it is "absolutely superfluous to consult other commentaries than those mentioned [i.e. al-Ṭabarī's, al-Rāzī's and al-Zamakhsharī's], to obtain exhaustive information of the history of Muslim *tafsīr*."

Recent developments, however, have been very encouraging. Every year new material is being edited or published; several monographs on individual commentators have been produced. More importantly we have scholars who have devoted their careers to the study of *tafsīr*, and the last ten years have witnessed a real expansion of the field.⁹ *Tafsīr* studies are now moving away from the obsession with origins that has for so long engaged the discipline; they have also broken away from studies devoted to the Qur'ān itself, a parting of ways that is not only overdue but will prove beneficial for both fields.

This study began as an attempt to bring to light a major source in the history of quranic exegesis: *al-Kashf wa-al-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by al-Tha'labī al-Naysabūrī (d. 427/1035). Ironically, the importance of this Qur'ān commentary has been well known for over a century, although only a fragment of the introduction was ever published.¹⁰ Gradually, as the full dimensions of al-Tha'labī's work emerged, the project became an investigation into the history of the formation of classical quranic exegesis. It was necessary to make an attempt to assess al-Tha'labī's relation to the tradition, and its relation to him. This study tries to chart what happened in the centuries that separate al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923) from al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144). It is a period of complete darkness from the point of view of modern scholarship because so few of the works that were produced during this period have been edited or studied. Yet these two centuries witnessed the rise to dominance of what will I call the Nishapuri school of Qur'ān commentary that was to prove extremely influential in quranic exegesis in the following centuries. Taking modern studies on *tafsīr* as a guide, one would little suspect that these two centuries made up one of the most intellectually vibrant periods in quranic exegesis. What modern scholars usually have in mind when they speak of classical Qur'ān commentaries was fashioned and re-articulated during this period. Yet these developments have remained unknown to scholarship. This study argues that the tradition does not make sense without an awareness of the developments that took place then.

⁹ See the works of Gerhard Böwering, Norman Calder, Claude Gilliot, Jane McAuliffe, Andrew Rippin, and Uri Rubin in the bibliography.

¹⁰ *Tafsīr* studies will always remain indebted to Isaiah Goldfeld for his edition of the beginning part of al-Tha'labī's introduction. More than anyone else, Goldfeld realized the significance of the work for any meaningful history of quranic exegesis. See the bibliography for Goldfeld's work.

The Qur'ān commentary of al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa-al-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, or *al-Kashf*, is the first of the major medieval commentaries that ushered in the high classical style of quranic exegesis. Its importance for the later development of the history of the genre has proved to be even more crucial than I suspected at the outset of this investigation. Indeed, I shall show in the chapters that follow that al-Tha'labī radically transformed and reshaped medieval quranic commentary. His work was, in fact, far more influential than that of al-Ṭabarī in redirecting the course of the genre. That I can make such an assertion on the basis of this study shows the degree to which our knowledge and conception of the history of this genre is provisional. For some time to come, it must remain subject to the kinds of revision in our understanding that result from an acquaintance with hitherto unstudied works like al-Tha'labī's. It is both exhilarating and sobering to realize how much work needs to be done before we have a complete picture of the main outlines of the quranic exegetical tradition.

Chapter One

I have devoted the first chapter of this work to a biography of al-Tha'labī based on extensive research in the Islamic biographical dictionaries. Though at times tedious, such research remains essential for shedding light on his environment and his intellectual development. Biographical dictionaries remain the major repository of information on the medieval Muslim scholars. We need constantly to refine our methods of reading these biographies in order to tease out what is of relevance to our understanding of that world.¹¹ With the increased attention that al-Tha'labī has been given in recent years, a definitive biography is now in order. One of the interesting surprises that came from digging into biographical dictionaries was my discovery that al-Tha'labī's main teacher was a man of Karrāmī background.¹² This is a most significant revelation in light

¹¹ On biographical dictionaries see Wadād al-Qāḍī, "Biographical dictionaries: Inner Structure and Cultural Significance," in *The Book in the Islamic World*, George N. Atiyeh, ed. (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 93–122.

¹² See chapter One for details on the life of al-Tha'labī's teachers and the Karrāmīyah.

of the persistent frustration of our attempts to understand the intellectual history of 4th/10th and early 5th/11th century Nishapur. It confirms what appears to be the preponderant importance of the Karrāmī sect in the maturation of quranic exegesis. Scholars working on the history of quranic exegesis will readily admit that signs of the influence of this sect have been elusive yet persistent and that any new information about this sect is more than welcome. The subsequent Sunnī tradition has attempted to downplay the significance of the Karrāmīs. Though I stop short of calling al-Tha'labī a Karrāmī, the reader will soon realize that some of the innovations he introduced have their origins in this school.

Chapter Two

Chapter two is a detailed analysis of a work of al-Tha'labī that narrates the stories of individuals who died when they heard the Qur'ān recited, *Qatlā al-Qur'ān*, (*Slain by the Qur'ān*). The work is a fascinating document that advances the claim that dying from the effect of hearing the recitation of the Qur'ān is martyrdom; hence the implied purpose of the work is to declare the act of reciting the Qur'ān and hearing it a *jihād* (strife). The highest rank of piety is thus preserved for Qur'ān recitation and *samā'* or hearing it read. To my knowledge, this work of al-Tha'labī is the boldest attempt by any commentator to position the Qur'ān as the all-encompassing tool for salvation. A study of *Qatlā al-Qur'ān*, which has been called a Šūfī work by some, is unavoidable in light of the assertion of many scholars that al-Tha'labī was a Šūfī of some sort. The relationship of al-Tha'labī to the Šūfī world has never been satisfactorily clarified and in this chapter I offer an extensive discussion of the issue.

Manuscripts of *al-Kashf*

The subsequent chapters of the book are devoted to *al-Kashf* itself, and a word on the manuscripts of this work is in order at this point. Joseph van Ess, in the preface to one of his works, speaks of the dilemma that faces the Islamicist when dealing with early Islamic religious history. Sources, van Ess remarks, are so unavailable, either unedited or simply undocumented, that no sooner do Islamicists make

an attempt to theorize or to envision a structure of historical development than they fall on their faces.¹³ The problem is nowhere more acute than in *tafsīr* studies, especially, as I have already mentioned, when dealing with the dark centuries, the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh. Wedged as they were, in the modern view of scholars, between two major authors, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) at one end, and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) at the other, these centuries have been presumed to hide no interesting authors or works. The assumption is that nothing of note happened in Sunnī orthodox *tafsīr* until the Mu'tazilite author al-Zamakhsharī spiced things up. A scholar who chooses one of the many unedited works from this period faces the double task of establishing the philological base-work before starting an analysis of the contents of the work. I could certainly have chosen to dedicate this book exclusively to such an endeavor, a thankless task in many respects but no less essential than the one I have pursued. The other option would have been to carry out an analysis of a certain commentary and delay the basic textual and philological work for later. I have settled on a compromise: the philological and textual work that lies at the base of this monograph have been kept in the background and, in some cases, relegated to appendices. Nevertheless, I have supplied the reader with all the necessary tools for assessing the examples I have used from this commentary. There is either a translation or a transcription of most of the material deployed; in most cases both are made available, and the readers will be able to judge for themselves the cogency of my arguments.

The manuscripts of al-Tha'labī's *al-Kashf* lie scattered in various parts of the world, literally, from Princeton to Hyderabad, and from Morocco to St. Petersburg. The challenge has been to collect and study this staggering array of manuscripts. I have been able to locate only one complete copy. This copy, Veliyuddin Efendi nos. 130–133, was copied in 1186 A.H. (1772 C.E.) a rather late date for this title. Most of the other manuscripts available were written between the seventh to tenth century of the Hijra. A close comparison of this late copy with the older fragments of the work, however, reveals that this is a reliable copy, and that apart from some added pious formulaic phrases it replicates the work faithfully.

¹³ Josef van Ess, *Ungenutzte Texte zur Karrāmīya: Eine Materialsammlung* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1980), 6.

The most valuable of the manuscripts, though, is the one housed in the Maḥmūdīyah library in Medina, Saudi Arabia; it is my primary witness copy and was relied upon extensively for this study. The value of this manuscript is indisputable since it is the earliest and most complete authenticated copy of the work to reach us. Only four generations separate its author from its copyist, who transcribed it between 624/1226 and 630/1232. It is most unfortunate that this manuscript is incomplete: of the thirteen volumes, four are missing.

In all I have used three main copies of the work for this study; in certain instances I included readings from single volumes from other copies to verify uncertain readings. Readers interested in the details of this fascinating history of the *al-Kashf* will find the relevant information at the end of this book in an appendix dedicated to the textual basis of my work.

Chapter Three

Chapter Three offers a detailed study of the sources of *al-Kashf*, both written and oral. I am in agreement with Isaiah Goldfeld that the work has preserved early material, and as such is of extreme importance for the study of the early history of the *tafsīr* tradition. The introduction of *al-Kashf* is a veritable summation of the state of *tafsīr* on the eve of the fifth century; al-Tha'labī reviews every major quranic commentary and speaks about the merits and flaws of each and every work produced before him. But not only quranic commentaries are evaluated; every other form of composition that has a direct bearing on the Qur'ān is examined, like compilations of studies on rare words (*gharīb* works), early commentaries (*ma'ānī*), works on variant readings (*qirā'āt*), and works of prophetic history (*sīra*). Indeed, it is the only Qur'ān commentary to my knowledge that lists all its sources so extensively. As such, it represents an important moment in the development of the art of quranic exegesis: it adopts a self-reflective stance by incorporating an assessment of the state of the art and attempting to advance into new territories. We are thus uniquely positioned to reconstruct the state of the field as inherited by al-Tha'labī.

It soon becomes clear that al-Tha'labī has not merely resumed the work of al-Ṭabarī as scholars have long assumed; rather, he has redone the whole of al-Ṭabarī's work and in doing so reconsidered the entire tradition. By this I mean that al-Tha'labī goes back to

the original sources of al-Ṭabarī, utilizes them and adds the new material that has arisen during the intervening century. Thus, the early Islamic exegetical tradition has been twice gathered: once by al-Ṭabarī and again by al-Tha'labī. With a grasp of al-Tha'labī's work, we are for the first time in a position to use two sources which are fully independent of each another to reexamine what we know about the early period of quranic exegesis. Any scholar who plans to study the development of early *tafsīr* must henceforth utilize al-Tha'labī's work. This, I believe, is the most important contribution my study has to make to our ongoing efforts to understand the historical development of early *tafsīr*. I should add that using al-Tha'labī's work will not be an easy task until we have a proper critical edition of *al-Kashf*. Moreover, the nature of citation in al-Tha'labī differs markedly from that of al-Ṭabarī, and thus scholars have to be careful how they go about utilizing the two together. Since most readers have no access to the work at present, I have attempted to give in this chapter as complete an analysis of the structure of the work as possible, including the method of its organization and presentation.

Chapters Four, Five & Six

Chapters Four, Five and Six are an analytical study of the hermeneutical principles of *al-Kashf*. By extension they also offer a study of the hermeneutical principles of classical quranic commentary. How did medieval commentators approach the Qur'ān? How did they interpret it, and how did a craft that was conservative in nature allow for transformation and innovation? These are some of the questions that I attempt to answer through a close study of al-Tha'labī's own method and approach. Few of the available modern studies of classical quranic commentary have attempted to give the reader an analysis of the inner workings and intricacies of the *tafsīr* genre.¹⁴ These chapters will thus give as full a description of the workings of quranic exegesis as possible. In the process, I engage in the ongoing scholarly debate on the best way to approach exegetical texts and the implications of our understanding of this approach for hermeneutical theory.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Tafsīr qua tafsīr*.

¹⁵ See David Stern's *Midrash and Theory* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

Analyzing the hermeneutical methods of al-Tha'labī has required that I situate him in the context of his discipline. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six I thus revisit the history of quranic exegesis, in an attempt to outline a different trajectory of its development than the one hitherto advanced by modern scholarship. In surveying the evidence, I have been forced to conclude that *al-Kashf* played an inordinately important role in the formation of the classical Qur'ān commentary tradition. Nothing in the secondary literature had prepared me to grasp this decisive role of al-Tha'labī's work in the history of quranic exegesis. Take, for example, the assessment of John Burton in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, Chapter 4: "Quranic Exegesis." Burton asserts that, "the highest place in the development of exegesis is occupied by Abū Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, whose towering *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* abruptly scaled heights not previously glimpsed and never subsequently approached."¹⁶ This assessment sees in al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) the culmination of the tradition of quranic commentary and relegates what came after him to the role of a mere variation on what he managed to achieve. It repeats and reinforces the widely-held belief that al-Ṭabarī perfected the tradition. Implicit in this assessment is the notion that medieval Qur'ān commentary was a static enterprise, in which the meaning of one verse was copied and recopied, and copied yet again, with little variation and no new insights. At best, the variations introduced during the subsequent centuries are seen as being more unreliable the further they are removed from the origin of the Qur'ān; what they bring is more corruption of the original meaning, which then has to be unearthed by our modern tools.

A more radical assessment of the tradition by John Wansbrough claims that the most important period in quranic exegesis takes place even earlier and is shorter in span—the period that lies between Muqātil (d. 150/767) and Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889). Wansbrough says that "within that period, the principles of exegesis were evolved and perfected, and it would not be too much to say that thereafter few, if any, methodological innovations were introduced."¹⁷ Perhaps

¹⁶ *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period*, M.J.L. Young, J.D. Latham and R.B. Serjeant, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 46.

¹⁷ *Quranic Studies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 140.

bold generalizations such as this are unavoidable in a field like *tafsīr* studies, yet the further one investigates the tradition, the more one hesitates to make such generalizations. We have to remember that literally hundreds of Qur'ān commentaries have not even been touched, let alone fully explored. But the present study argues that we can make this generalization: both of the above-mentioned assessments mistake *tafsīr*'s genealogical mode of literary creativity for stagnation and they do so because of our romantic notions of creativity as originality.¹⁸ Both assessments also betray the belief that Qur'ān commentary was a detached, ahistorical enterprise with no connection to the cultural milieu in which it was produced; or worse still, that the cultural milieu of Islamic civilization after the ninth century had nothing more to say about its most central and abiding interest: the meaning of the Qur'ān. These assumptions make the exegete stand, implausibly, for the presumed nature of this religious tradition, unchanging, and more importantly opaque;¹⁹ were these assumptions true, one could not tell by reading a commentary its provenance or its time. Such assumptions could not be more unfounded.

My findings, which are not in agreement with Burton's assessment mentioned above, are based on meticulous comparisons between the work of al-Tha'labī and the literature that came after and before him. First, I subjected the work to what I call macro-level analysis: at any given moment I would have open the works of three other commentators with which to compare al-Tha'labī's work: al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), while the works of al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) and al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) were also frequently consulted.²⁰ This approach is essential in any study of the *tafsīr* tradition because of its genealogical nature. A synoptic treatment and mode of analysis are a must. In turn, I subjected al-Tha'labī's work, *al-Kashf*, to a close reading, or what I call the micro-level analysis. The two methods are, of course, interdependent and impossible to separate in reality. The combination of

¹⁸ For more on the genealogical nature of *tafsīr* see below in this introduction.

¹⁹ J.J.G. Jansen in *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, p. vii, calls the whole enterprise of *tafsīr* "mysterious," but he fails to tell us why: "To the Western reader a Koran commentary is something mysterious. In order to mitigate the severity of this mysteriousness, an attempt to classify contemporary commentaries would be welcome."

²⁰ Other exegetes were also consulted as the need arose; eventually a list of the major exegetes needs to be devised to help scholars study the medieval tradition.

these two approaches, I hope, has allowed me to keep my analysis and conclusions rooted in a historical frame, thus avoiding errant generalizations. Finally, I studied the cultural atmosphere surrounding al-Tha'labī, the intellectual debates, the theological battles, and the literary trends of his time and attempted to see connections between these and his commentary.

As I have already mentioned, one of the surprising discoveries of my work was the paucity of evidence proving that al-Ṭabarī's work was in fact as influential as we are accustomed to believe. Significant as al-Ṭabarī was, I was forced to conclude that he was not the major architect of the tradition he is widely believed to be. Al-Tha'labī's work, however, appears to have been the starting point of the major subsequent quranic commentators. One does not need to look deeply into the works of these writers to recognize his influence, his sentences, and his preferences. Later commentators could not avoid him. His was a work that towered above all.

In chapter Four I analyze al-Tha'labī's explicit theoretical statements on exegesis. This chapter is a close reading of al-Tha'labī's introduction to his Qur'ān commentary, where he gives us his own assessment of the field as it stood on the eve of the publication of his work. His insight into, and understanding of, the field are remarkable. The introduction speaks of fourteen rules to be followed when interpreting a verse. The fourteen rules appear to be an elaboration of rules from a now lost Karrāmī source, or at least they are based on the Karrāmī school of quranic interpretation. One of the interesting aspects of medieval quranic commentary is the relationship between the theoretical pronouncements on the part of the authors, on the one hand, and their actual practice when carrying out the task of commenting on the Qur'ān on the other, and in this regard, al-Tha'labī is no exception. In order to avoid prejudging my analysis I decided to separate the two and compare the degree to which one can find agreement between theory and practice.

Chapters Five and Six, the bulk of this book, are divided into ten subsections, each devoted to analyzing one aspect of al-Tha'labī's hermeneutics. Each of these sections can be read independently, yet each is but one aspect of a larger picture. It is here that I attempt to offer a new taxonomy and method of reading medieval Qur'ān commentary. I have scrupulously avoided prejudging my reading of al-Tha'labī's method by borrowing existing terminology that has grown out of studying different exegetical traditions, when I deemed

such a borrowing unnecessary. Though my work is inspired in many ways by the approach of the modern scholars studying Midrash, I avoided using words like halakhic, haggadic, masoretic, which can, by their very entrenchment in the Jewish tradition, predispose our understanding when used outside their original context.²¹

Chapters Five and Six of this study are an attempt to redirect the tenor and approach of modern studies to *tafsīr* literature. It is not only language, time, and culture that separate us from these exegetes, but our own misguided or inadequate sense of *tafsīr* literature. Thus, many modern readers of this literature approach it with a preconceived idea of what to expect, and failing to find it, they declare their disappointment in those exegetes.²² Yet the fault does not lie in the modern readers alone. One could argue that the *tafsīr* literature itself insisted on presenting itself as a predominantly philological craft, and it manages in the process to convince us of this claim and appears to invite us to judge it by this standard. I would argue, instead, that the most intriguing aspect of the history of medieval Qur'ān commentary involves the interaction between philology and *tafsīr*, and I raise this question: how could quranic exegetes use a science (philology) invented to understand the text of the Qur'ān without undermining the Qur'ān's sanctity and coherence, and instead incorporate that science into a discipline that was primarily a doctrinal enterprise?

Chapter Seven

Finally, Chapter Seven covers the history of the use of al-Tha'labī in the subsequent exegetical tradition. One of the most intriguing chapters in the story of al-Tha'labī's work is the shadow it cast on the history of polemical wars among the Sunnīs and the Shī'īs. Having

²¹ The literature on midrash is immense. The best place to start would be David Stern's *Midrash and Theory*.

²² Patricia Crone is a good example of modern scholars who find a lot to disparage about the *tafsīr* tradition. She takes the tradition to task for not offering the true meaning of a verse or word: "Given that the entire exegetical tradition is characterized by a proliferation of diverse interpretations, it is legitimate to wonder whether guesswork did not play as great a role in its creation as did recollection." Crone fails to ask why *tafsīr* should offer one meaning instead of a diverse array of meanings to a certain verse. Muslim exegetes were not 19th century German philologists. See her "Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qur'ān," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994), 2.

incorporated a certain amount of pro-Shī'ite material, *al-Kashf* was used heavily by the Shī'ite polemicists to bolster their claims. Soon the work became an embarrassment to the Sunnī camp. It is in this light that we have to understand the assessments issued about al-Tha'labī in later Sunnī bibliographical dictionaries. *Al-Kashf* has had both the good fortune of being one of the most important of formative classical Qur'ān commentaries and the misfortune of becoming the most distrusted of them all. The history of the reception of *al-Kashf*, Chapter Seven will show, can thus become a history of Sunnī-Shī'ī intellectual interaction.

Theoretical Considerations

It should be evident from the foregoing account that this book makes several theoretical assumptions vis-à-vis the classical Qur'ān commentary tradition. I would like to discuss these theoretical assumptions now at length. The first is that classical Qur'ān commentary is what I call a genealogical tradition.²³ By "genealogical" I mean a certain dialectical relationship that each new commentary, and hence each exegete, had with the previous tradition as a whole. At every moment the tradition was in its totality available to the exegete. A commentator stood amidst a tradition that saw continuity of shared hermeneutical principles as the primary mode of operation. Thus, even when a commentator disagreed with the interpretations of a predecessor he nevertheless would not dismiss them outright. The preferred mode of disagreement was to add one's voice to the pool of interpretations inherited. Omissions were also glaring because of the omnipresent availability of the whole tradition. Changes and innovations were, by the same token, more easily overlooked and thus introduced as it were, almost imperceptibly. Nevertheless, this did not preclude the fact that at certain intervals individual exegetes

²³ Cf. with McAuliffe, "Classical and modern *tafsīr* represents, to a large extent, a coherent and internally consistent body of literature. It has developed within the confines of a limited number of hermeneutical principles. It is remarkably uninterrupted craft, whose contemporary practitioners are fully conversant with their tenth-, twelfth-, and fourteenth-century counterparts. Rare is the modern Biblical scholar who is on easy terms with Rabanus Maurus (d. 856), Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1144), and Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1349). Yet just as uncommon would be the modern Muslim exegetes who were not thoroughly familiar with al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373)," in her *Qur'anic Christians*, 28.

would cause major upheavals in the tradition due to an emphasis on one of the many currents that constitute the tradition to the exclusion of others, thereby attempting to reverse the encyclopedic nature of the *tafsīr*. More importantly, however, the genealogical nature of this tradition meant that it was impossible to oust any major component of the tradition after it had gained entry. The tradition was always conceived as a whole, and as such an exegete could and did go back to highlight a now-forgotten method, position, or interpretation. As such, the interpretive tradition had the eerie ability to manifest itself in its totality even at the moment an exegete thought that he succeeded in changing it.²⁴

Designating this genre as genealogical has certain implications for the proper study of, and approach to, *tafsīr*. One cannot study any given Qur'ān commentary in isolation. It has to be seen in conjunction with the tradition that produced it and the influences it left behind—the synoptic approach I mentioned earlier.²⁵ Soon a pattern emerges in each commentary that shows both its indebtedness to the tradition and its variance from it.

The genealogical nature of the tradition has been invariably assumed in the scholarly literature though never fully articulated or given a name. Yet the genealogical mode of creativity of *tafsīr* has been misread completely. It is primarily considered as one of the tradition's major handicaps.²⁶ Repetitiveness is thus seen as the *tafsīr*'s essence, and

²⁴ Note the fascinating predicament of medieval Muslim radical exegetes who attempted to rid the tradition of what they would call "*isrā'īliyyāt*" i.e. the exegetical material that they considered to be of Jewish origin which has no equivalent in Muslim tradition. If *isnād* and early attestation is the criteria for accepted exegetical traditions then *isrā'īliyyāt* are uncontested. Try as they might, the radical exegetes could not expunge them from the tradition, they could only denounce them. On *isrā'īliyyāt*, see Roberto Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'īliyyāt* in Muslim Literature," *Arabica* 46 (1999): 193–210.

²⁵ I am aware of the problematic nature of this statement. One can hardly dispute the value of studying a commentary in light of what came before it. It is not clear why what came after should matter, at least not at first. The genealogical tradition of *tafsīr* does justify such a study.

²⁶ Harris Birkeland in *The Lord Guideth*, though generous in his assessment of the innovativeness of the tradition, is unable to break away from the prevailing impression that stagnation was the hallmark of *tafsīr*. At a certain point he informs the reader that not much has happened since 1000 A.D., (p. 135). The conclusion of the book includes such sentences as the following: "The *ymā* stabilized on certain interpretations and possibilities gives all Muslim commentaries a tiresome, uniform appearance. After al-Ṭabarī, az-Zamakhsharī, and ar-Rāzī nothing essentially new has entered orthodox *tafsīr*" (p. 136). After al-Rāzī, Birkeland asserts that "the productive Muslim *tafsīr* has come to an end. Later commentators chiefly copy and rearrange material or make abridgments of older works." (p. 137).

the exegete is presumed to have been adept at one thing: the recycling of a stockpile of interpretations floating in the air. The rationale behind his choice of a certain interpretation, however, has remained a mystery that is presumed to elude or hold no interest for the modern scholar. There seems to be a solid consensus among scholars as to what the genre is not, but very little agreement about what it is.

The second theoretical assumption in the approach to the tradition of Qur'ān commentary that this book adopts is that the tradition is constituted by two main sub-genres: that of the encyclopedic Qur'ān commentary and that of the *madrasa*-style Qur'ān commentary.²⁷ Each of these sub-genres comes with its own assumptions and rules as to how to do exegesis and how to compile it. This characterization of the tradition also carries with it methodological implications as to how one must study the tradition. The distinction goes beyond the operative assumptions of medieval Muslim scholars. These scholars have in many ways managed to convince us to take the *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* (tradition-based commentary) and *tafsīr bi-al-ra'y* (opinion-based commentary) as intrinsic characteristics of Qur'ān commentary and thus as the major categories for understanding it. This division of the tradition into two forms was meant to convey the notion that one part of the tradition was authority-based and hence authentic and reliable (*tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*), and the other whimsical and capricious, using personal opinion as its guide and hence unreliable (*tafsīr bi-al-ra'y*). This, however, was an ideological division of the genre that was aimed at consolidating the mainstream Sunnī interpretive tradition and undermining the non-Sunnī approaches as well as deviant Sunnī interpretations. It succeeded well in what it aimed to do, yet it managed to acquire a life of its own both in *tafsīr*—and later on, in modern scholarship—that has no basis in the genre itself. Most of the *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* is in reality a *tafsīr bi-al-ra'y*.²⁸ One cannot speak of commentaries that are self-styled *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* till the radical hermeneutics advocated by Ibn Taymīyah establishes the theoretical foundation for this trend.²⁹ A better way to look at the tradition, this book argues, is to divide it into the two major

²⁷ See the Conclusion of this book where I add another sub-genre to these two.

²⁸ The best analysis of the fictitious nature of the difference between the two is in Harris Birkeland's "Old Muslim Opposition Against Interpretation of the Koran," *Avhandlingar Utgitt Av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi I Oslo* (II. Hist.-Filos., Klasse. 1955. No. 1), 28–32.

²⁹ See Chapter Seven for a detailed exposition of Ibn Taymīyah's views.

categories that I have outlined, encyclopedic and *madrasa*. Classification of a commentary as belonging to *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* means only that it was acceptable to the Sunnī camp. It sheds little light on what it is actually about.

Moreover, I see little help in the characterization of Ignaz Goldziher, which divides the exegetical tradition into grammatical, doctrinal, mystical, sectarian, and modern modes.³⁰ Goldziher's analysis remains a classic of scholarship on the *tafsīr* genre, yet it imposes a schematization that is not readily apparent in the tradition. It is not clear to me how calling an interpretation that is mystic "mystical" can really add to our understanding of such an interpretation. What I object to most in Goldziher's analysis is his depiction of certain commentaries as exclusively "mystical" or "doctrinal," etc. Such characterizations impose upon exegesis a much more rigid plan than the tradition itself allows. It also fails to show how the whole tradition worked as a genre and how different exegetes related to the tradition. Is not a mystical approach to the Qur'ān by definition a doctrinal approach also? And what then should one make of a grammatical approach that also included a mystical approach? When one encounters a Qur'ān commentary that has all the six elements outlined in Goldziher's characterization, what sort of commentary are we to call it?³¹

Encyclopedic commentaries, true to their name, were voluminous; yet voluminousness, I shall argue, is not the main criterion for this qualification. They are encyclopedic because they allowed the doctrine of *ijmā'* (consensus) to be operative in exegesis. Consensus (*ijmā'*) was one of the modes of generating laws in the Sunnī legal tradition. The doctrine maintained that the totality of the Muslims when they agree on a matter accord it a divine status, since Muslims cannot agree on error. *Ijmā'* was, however, an operative mode of thinking that permeated every intellectual activity and not just law. Indeed, it is my contention that in law it was of less significance than in other disciplines. Thus I am interested here in the practical effect of the doctrine of *ijmā'* in the context of encyclopedic Qur'ān commentary rather than *ijmā'*'s definition, and by extension, what is usually understood

³⁰ See his *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1920).

³¹ Cf. Jansen's bewilderment after an attempt at classification of *tafsīr* in his *The Interpretation of the Koran*, p. viii: "It would be most attractive to be able to divide the mass of Koran commentaries into a number of groups according to their tendency. Such a clear-cut division according to tendencies, however, is falsified by the mixed nature of the contents of most commentaries."

by it. *Ijmā'*, by claiming infallibility for consensus among Muslims—a consensus that remained ever elusive—in fact made possible the admissibility of the differences in all religious matters. The infallibility, since it was never achievable through *ijmā'*, was, as it were, diffused among the different positions regarding any given matter upon which different opinions were held. In practice, thus, *ijmā'* worked paradoxically to negate the very idea of consensus. In reality Sunnism was a large umbrella under which many ideas and doctrines co-existed. Sunnīs were catholic by the sheer fact that they were able to allow sectarianism in law to be part of their self-understanding. *Ijmā'* managed to achieve a unified Muslim community which, despite its differences, was a unity, a *jamā'ah*.³²

The implications of such a stance eventually manifested themselves on the hermeneutical level. Quranic exegesis became Sunnī by becoming polyvalent. The Qur'ān spoke in many meanings, and they were all true, unless there developed an *ijmā'* (a consensus) concerning a particular meaning. Since few interpretations became subject to an *ijmā'* and hence no unanimous meanings were ever attached to them, each varied interpretation was true on its own. A verse could have conflicting interpretations, each of which could be adduced as part of the meaning of the word of God without disrupting the notion of the clarity of the Qur'ān. This was a hermeneutical feat not to be belittled. It was instrumental in the consolidation of Sunnī intellectual life and a main cause for its resilience despite its many inconsistencies. Just as in law Sunnism tolerated several schools so in exegesis a polyvalent Qur'ān was seen as the norm. Al-Ṭabarī was the first architect to work out the plurality of meanings as a constitutive element of *ijmā'*-based exegesis.

Al-Tha'labī enlarged and modified the notion of an encyclopedic approach to the interpretation of the Qur'ān. It became in his hand receptive to all the material that could shed light on the Qur'ān

³² For an in-depth analysis of consensus as an ideological concept see Norman Calder's "Ikhtilāf and Ijmā' in Shāfi'ī's *Risāla*," *Studia Islamica* 58 (1983): 55–81, esp. 71–73. For references on *ijmā'* see Wael Hallaq's "On the Authoritativeness of Sunni Consensus," *IJMES* 18 (1986): 427–454. Recently Hallaq added Addenda to this article when it was reissued in *Law and Legal Theory in Classical and Medieval Islam* (Variorum, 1994). There he mentions al-Rāzī as the only *usūlī* to refute the infallibility of *ijmā'*. Joseph Lowry does not agree with the current understanding of Shāfi'ī's *Risālah* but his analysis does not refute what I have to say here about *ijmā'* and *tafsīr*. See his dissertation *The Legal-Theoretical Content of the Risāla of Muhammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī*, (University of Pennsylvania, 1999), 426–470.

including even material that his predecessors never considered. With al-Tha'labī we thus witness the introduction into quranic exegesis of the full spectrum of the Arabo-Islamic heritage as it stood on the eve of the fifth century A.H. Quranic commentary thereby became the repository of all the accumulated knowledge that was available at his time. That God spoke his word in history meant to the exegete that history was in the word of God. Take for example Arabic poetry.³³ Poetry stood at the pinnacle of human artistic perfection in pre-Islamic Arabia; and poetic creativity was, of course, at odds with quranic claims to exceptionalism. The enmity between the two was neither hidden nor could it be easily argued away. Al-Tha'labī, however, would fashion a reconciliation through his commentary. He introduced poetry to the body of quranic interpretation as a valid tool of the new hermeneutics. That which charms through its rhyme could also explain. Wisdom sayings, *adab* material, historical information, anecdotes—all became, in al-Tha'labī's hands, valid tools for the exegete's endeavor to elucidate the meaning of the Qur'ān.

Al-Tha'labī's enlargement of the encyclopedic spirit was an attempt to resolve the cultural struggle that raged within high Islamic societies all over the medieval Muslim world during the period between the fourth and sixth centuries of the Hijra. The object of this struggle was the soul of the educated man in the Arabo-Islamic synthesis. The rise of *adab* (belle-lettres) and *adab* encyclopedic compilations—as the embodiment of what a learned individual was to know and cherish—was a threat to the wish of the religious-minded to make the Qur'ān the center of the learning experience. But not only was *adab* making strides in this battle, but so, too, was mysticism or Sufism, with its claim both to understand the human condition and proffer remedies for it. If these two strands, which were at the center of the Sunnī, or *jamā'ah* community, were not enough, we have to keep in mind the great danger that the Shī'ī camp posed to the *jamā'ah*-minded people. Shi'ism, that is, intellectual Shi'ism, was also making advances over the breadth of the Islamic world and undermining everywhere the intellectual foundations of *jamā'ah* and Sunnī orientations. It is al-Tha'labī, I argue, whom we should credit with rising to the challenge of *adab*, Sufism, and Shi'ism, to reassert the centrality of a Sunnī-interpreted Qur'ān in the lives of the educated.

³³ Here I mean poetry as poetry, not as a philological tool used to elucidate a grammatical point in the Qur'ān (known as *shawāhid* in *tafsīr* and *grammar*). See page 174–175.

It is in this light that we have to understand al-Tha'labī's introduction of Ṣūfī or mystical interpretations and Shī'ī material into traditional method of exegesis. It was a bold act that was at the heart of the reconciliation that enabled Sunnism to overcome its opponents.

Harris Birkeland was the first to recognize a connection between quranic commentary and the notion of *ijmā'*.³⁴ He nevertheless understood *tafsīr* to be an embodiment of a consensus or *ijmā'* regarding the meanings of verses; he assumed that *tafsīr* reflected the consensus that had developed about a certain meaning at a certain time. This study shows Birkeland's assumption to be an impossibility, since, by its very nature, *tafsīr* was never one book: it was a tradition. There was never one meaning for any one verse; even if one commentary gives only one meaning, there was always a multitude of meanings or commentaries. Moreover, an interpretation that was common, say, in the third century and was dropped later by other exegetes cannot be presumed to have disappeared. Its absence simply means that it is not operative, but it remains part of the tradition and can be claimed by any later exegete should he see fit. The genealogical nature of *tafsīr* meant that nothing, once picked up, could be jettisoned. *Tafsīr* did not reflect consensus by dropping things out; it represented consensus by including things. The consensus that was operative in *tafsīr* was thus a consensus at the metaphysical level: all meanings sanctioned by Sunnism were admissible and they were sanctioned by Sunnism because Sunnism set loose boundaries for acceptance. Even the examples Birkeland used point to conclusions opposite to those he drew. The meanings for the word *al-kawthar* (108:1), Birkeland's prime example, multiplied as time went by. There was never a consensus on what *al-kawthar* meant; rather there was a consensus that it meant many things.

Thus encyclopedic commentaries always ran the risk of becoming impossibly voluminous, so much so that the moment some were written they were never to be perused again. We read in the bibliographical dictionaries of Qur'ān commentaries running into 50 or 100 volumes.³⁵

³⁴ *The Lord Guideth: Studies on Primitive Islam*, 5–12.

³⁵ The impossibly large *Alqāṭib al-Ghayb* of al-Rāzī, or al-Qurṭubī's commentary are a few examples of large scale medieval encyclopedic Qur'ān commentaries that have been printed. For commentaries that run to 50 or 100 volumes, see the remarks of al-Suyūṭī on many commentators in his *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, 'Alī 'Umar, ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1972). Entry number 57 (p. 67) on a certain 'Abd al-Salām al-Qazwīnī states that his commentary was in 300 volumes (or 500 volumes

These are not mere medieval exaggerations. The remarks of the exegete Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī al-Gharnāṭī (d. 745/1344) on the 100-volume quranic commentary of his teacher Ibn al-Naṣīb (d. 698/1298) are a stunning firsthand report of the existence of such works.³⁶ A closer look at other disciplines makes clear that such voluminous works were common. Ibn 'Asākir's *History of Damascus* comes to mind. Entire books would eventually be written on the interpretation of a single chapter of the Qur'ān or even on a single verse.

It is this expansive attitude of Sunnī exegesis that quickly forced the exegetical tradition to react and start producing what I have termed *madrasa* style commentaries.³⁷ The first such commentary to reach us was the one produced by Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 370/980).³⁸ The *madrasa* commentaries, I should emphasize, were not simply monovalent interpretations of the Qur'ān, although some might have been; rather they were more of a shorthand summary of the encyclopedic commentaries.³⁹ If encyclopedic commentaries were elaborations on the verses of the Qur'ān, *madrasa* commentaries were epitomes of the commentaries themselves. The *madrasa* commentaries summarized, omitted, elaborated, and highlighted interpretations or views already adduced in the encyclopedic commentaries; as such they were an impetus for debate, and a challenge to the tradition. Indeed we can name for each encyclopedic commentary its *madrasa* counterpart. The very breadth of an encyclopedic commentary called for a shorthand version. *Madrasa* commentaries were

according to another report). The first chapter of the Qur'ān (*al-Fātiḥah*) took seven volumes to explain. One volume was devoted entirely to verse 2:102. See also entries numbered 101 (p. 103), 109 (p. 108), 113 (p. 112). On encyclopedism in medieval Islam, see Roger Paret, "Contribution à l'étude des milieux culturels dans le Proche-Orient médiéval: «l'encyclopédisme» arabo-musulman de 850 à 950 de l'ère chrétienne," *Revue Historique* 235 (1966), 47–100, esp. 92–100.

³⁶ Abū Ḥayyān, *Tafsīr al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 'Adil al-Mawjūd et al., eds. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1993), v. 1: 114–115.

³⁷ Norman Calder was the first to draw attention to the connection between the colleges and the *madrasa* style commentaries. See his remarks in "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef, ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 104.

³⁸ On al-Samarqandī see *EI*, v. 1: 137.

³⁹ The term is first used by Jane McAuliffe in her remarks about Ibn al-Jawzī's Qur'ān commentary in her article "Ibn al-Jawzī's Exegetical Propaedeutic: Introduction and Translation," *Alif* 8 (1988), 104: "In fact, the *ẓād al-masīr* is a kind of "short-hand" *tafsīr*. So elliptical is his method that Ibn al-Jawzī's work would be very difficult to understand for one who had no acquaintance with the other principal works of traditional exegesis."

essential to maintaining the vitality of the tradition and prevented it from becoming a merely unopened storehouse of material.

Madrasa commentaries thus presuppose encyclopedic works and hence can only be read with those works in mind. It is essential that we ourselves keep this fact in mind when we approach the history of this tradition. We should not judge the *madrasa* style commentaries by the same criteria we use to judge the encyclopedic ones. There were severe limitations on the *madrasa* commentaries, and their aim was more to bolster a position or correct a tendency than to refashion the tradition. But more importantly, *madrasa* style commentaries were never able to break free in any measurable way from the tone set by the encyclopedic commentaries.⁴⁰

Exegesis and the Triumph of Sunnism

What allowed al-Tha'labī to incorporate poetry qua poetry and many other aspects of Arabo-Islamic literature and make them part of the exegetical exercise was his notion of the Qur'ān as the ultimate expression of the ideal Islamic experience. The hermeneutical exercise was not only an exegetical exercise, but a cultural and pietistic act. In the Qur'ān lies hidden everything, according to this view, and in its explanation one finds reflected the whole culture of fourth century Islam. This encyclopedic understanding of interpretation opened the way for later exegetes to produce the classical commentaries that we are all familiar with. Al-Qurṭubī's and al-Rāzī's works are thus an inevitable outcome of the activities of al-Tha'labī—and *al-Kashf* deserves to be placed at the center of classical quranic exegesis.

Moreover, al-Tha'labī was working at the time when Sunnism was most politically weak but also most culturally open. The triumph of Sunnism was ultimately an intellectual victory. The synthesis that allowed this victory started in the field of quranic interpretation, and

⁴⁰ The Sunnī acceptance and embrace of al-Zamakhsharī's commentary—the Mu'tazilī al-Zamakhsharī—is the best example I can think of that points to the severe limits that even a staunch partisan of a doctrinal school faced in attempting to change the exegetical tradition. Al-Zamakhsharī's commentary, which I consider to be an example of *madrasa* style commentaries, was accepted because as a whole his commentary was heavily dependent on the Sunnī exegetical tradition. His Mu'tazilī opinions are few and far between to be significant and too buried in a normative Sunnī approach to allow them a distinctive voice. Was Sunnism converted or was Mu'tazilism made harmless is the question. I opt for the second view.

al-Tha'labī was its first great representative. Thus almost a century before al-Ghazālī's grand reconciliation with mysticism, al-Tha'labī had admitted Ṣūfī hermeneutics into mainstream interpretation. Shi'ism was contained by appropriating the love of the House of Muhammad as a main aspect of pietistic Sunnism. And rationalism was dethroned by proclaiming the salvific power of belonging to the Muslim community (*umma*) which every verse of the Qur'ān proclaimed. All of these were sanctioned apparently by the Qur'ān, and the exegetes were the heralds of a triumphant orthodox Sunnism.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LIFE OF AL-THA'LABĪ

The metropolis that was Nishapur, the city where our author lived and worked, can only be revisited today through the help of scholarship. Archeology, history, and literature must be invoked in order to reconstruct this lost emporium, once the hub of the eastern provinces of the Islamic world. Indeed, nothing remains of the old city but ruins that lie on the outskirts of post-Mongol Nishapur.¹ The center of East-West trade, medieval Nishapur enjoyed a thriving economy that sustained a complex and leisured society. Writing in the middle of the fourth/tenth century, al-Muqaddasī (or al-Maqdisī) is full of praise for Nishapur. He twice repeats the remark that he had never seen a comparable city in the whole of Islamdom.² Everything he saw, from the markets to the fine buildings of its schools, impressed him. The large number of scholars active in its schools, he notes, has made the city a much-frequented center of education (*wa-yurḥal ilayhi fī ṭalab al-ʿilm*). Al-Muqaddasī assures us that no day passes without a symposium (*majlis naẓar*) taking place.³

Such was the abundance of illustrious names the city produced that legends could easily be fabricated about friendships between famous natives of Nishapur, natives who most probably never met. Thus Nizām al-Mulk, the minister, ʿUmar al-Khayyām, the poet, and Ḥasan al-Ṣabbāḥ, the radical revolutionary, were alleged to have been school friends.⁴

For a long time modern scholars have realized the importance of the city in the history of medieval Islam. F. Meier calls it the cultural capital (*kulturelle Hauptstadt*) of Iran from the fourth to the sixth

¹ See Charles Kyrle Wilkinson's *Nishapur: Some Early Islamic Buildings and their Decoration* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986) for the topography of pre-Mongol Nishapur.

² Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālim*, M.J. De Goeje, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1906), 314–315.

³ Ibid., 315.

⁴ See Harold Bowen's "The *sar-gudhashī-i sayyidnā*, the 'Tale of the Three Schoolfellows' and the *wasaya* of the Nizām al-Mulk," *JRAS* (1931): 771–782.

centuries of the Hijrah (ninth to the eleventh centuries).⁵ C. Bosworth devotes two chapters of his book *The Ghaznavids* to a discussion of the economic and social history of the city.⁶ Richard Bulliet has devoted much of his career to Nishapur.⁷ These studies have shed light on a highly developed society that counted among its members adherents of the major doctrinal trends current in medieval Islam.

Political and Social Conditions in Nishapur

It is not my intention here to repeat the findings of scholarship on the social and political conditions of medieval Nishapur. Indeed, the books, articles, and dissertations on subjects related to Nishapur are too many even to summarize.⁸ My intention is to highlight what I consider essential for a better understanding of al-Tha'labī and his work.

⁵ Fritz Meier, "Hürāsān und das Ende der klassischen Šūfīk," in *Atti del convegno internazionale sul tema: La Persia nel Medioevo* (Rome, 1970), 546.

⁶ C.E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids: Their Empire in Afghanistan and Eastern Iran 994–1040* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963), 145–202.

⁷ See his book *The Patricians of Nishapur* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). Some of his relevant articles on Nishapur are: "A Mu'tazilite Coin of Mahmūd of Ghazna," *The American Numismatic Society, Museum Notes* 15 (1969): 119–129; "The Shaikh al-Islām and the Evolution of Islamic Society," *Studia Islamica* 35 (1972): 53–67; "Medieval Nishapur: A Topographic and Demographic Reconstruction," *Studia Iranica* 5 (1976): 67–89; "Local Politics in Eastern Iran Under the Ghaznavids and Seljuks," *Iranian Studies* 11 (1978): 35–56; "The Age Structure of Medieval Islamic Education," *Studia Islamica* 57 (1983): 105–117; "Pottery Styles and Social Status in Medieval Khurasan," in *Archaeology, Annales, and Ethnohistory*, A. Bernard Knapp, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 75–78.

⁸ In addition to the works already mentioned, see the following: R. Bulliet "The Political-Religious History of Nishapur in the Eleventh Century," in *Islamic Civilization 950–1150*, D.S. Richards, ed. (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer Ltd., 1973): 71–91. On the Karrāmīyah in Nishapur, see C.E. Bosworth "The Rise of the Karrāmīyah in Khurasan," *The Muslim World* 50 (1960): 5–14; Josef van Ess, *Ungenützte Texte zur Karrāmīya*; Afaf Hatoum, *An Eleventh Century Karrāmī Text: Abū Ḥafṣ an-Nisābūrī's "Raunaq al-Majālīs"* (Dissertation: Columbia University, 1991); Margaret Malamud, "The Politics of Heresy in Medieval Khurasan: The Karrāmīya in Nishapur," *Iranian Studies* 27 (1994): 37–51; Aron Zysow, "Two Unrecognized Karrāmī Texts," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108 (1988): 577–587. On Šūfīs, see Jacqueline Chabbi, "Remarques sur le développement historique des mouvements ascétiques et mystiques au Khurasan," *Studia Islamica* 46 (1977): 5–72; Margaret Malamud, "Sufi Organizations and Structures of Authority in Medieval Nishapur," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26 (1994): 427–442; Fritz Meier, *Abū Sa'īd Abū L-Ḥayr* (357–440/967–1049) *Wirklichkeit und Legende* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976); Bernard Radtke, "Theologen und Mystiker in Hürāsān und Transoxanien," *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Wissenschaften und der Kultur* 136 (1986): 536–569. All the articles in Wilfred Madelung's *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988) are also important. On the Shāfi'ī school, see the relevant sections in Heinz Halm, *Die Ausbreitung der Šāfi'itischen Rechtsschule von den Anfängen bis zum 8./14.*

The most important aspect of the political life in Nishapur from the middle of the fourth/eleventh century to 427/1035 (the death date of al-Tha'labī) is that the regional dynasties in control, namely the Samanids and later the Ghaznavids who took over Khurasan in 389/999, were staunch supporters of the Abbasid government.⁹ This meant that they stood in opposition to the Fāṭimid ideology of militant Ismā'īlī Shi'ism. Indeed, the Ghaznavids would make combating heresy a primary legitimizing policy. Ismā'īlī Islam, apart from a transient stint in power during the Samanids' rule, was always an underground movement, kept in check by heavy persecution.¹⁰ In return for this policy the Sunnī 'ulamā' (scholars) actively supported and endorsed the rule of these two dynasties. Indeed, one could argue for a reciprocally beneficial relationship between the state and the 'ulamā'; on the one side the state supported and fostered orthodox Islam, on the other the 'ulamā' supplied the state with its legitimizing ideological base.¹¹

The other important facet about Nishapur is that it was a point of conference for all the doctrinal currents of Islam at that time. Ḥanafīs, Shāfi'īs, Ash'arīs, Mu'tazilīs, Karrāmīs, Šūfīs, and various Shī'ī sects were all active and represented in the city. Nishapur was an intellectual center, where polemics and doctrinal borrowings were the order of the day. It should also be remembered that Sunnī groups like the Ḥanafīs and the Shāfi'īs were as ready to fight each other as the Karrāmīs and the Shī'īs. M. Malamud characterizes the situation as follows:

In Khurasan, as elsewhere, there was a wide range of Islamic thought and a variety of paths to religious recognition. Not only did Shi'ism pose a threat to unity, but within Sunni Islam there was no consensus on what constituted normative Islam. In this fluid period there was no agreement on which of the existing styles of Islam was canonical and competition and strife were common between different factions.¹²

Jahrhundert (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1974). The articles of Margaret Malamud are good summaries of the scholarly debate on Nishapur.

⁹ On the Ghaznavids see Bosworth's book. The only comprehensive work available on the Samanids is the dissertation of W.L. Treadwell, *The Political History of the Sāmānid State* (Dissertation, Oxford University, 1991).

¹⁰ On the Ismā'īlī takeover of the Samanid state see Treadwell, *Political History*, 186–211.

¹¹ The most lucid analysis of this point is by Jürgen Paul, *The State and the Military: The Samanid Case*, Papers on Inner Asia No. 26 (Bloomington, 1994), 21.

¹² "The Politics of Heresy in Medieval Khurasan: The Karrāmīya in Nishapur," *Iranian Studies* 27 (1994), 38.

Thus in this milieu, terms like "Sunnism", "orthodoxy", and "heresy" should be used only with care.

We will have the opportunity to see that though al-Tha'labī is a Sunnī, he is not typical of them. This, however, is not due to any inconsistency on his part; rather it is the result of the reification of the term "Sunnism". Sunnism meant different things at different times, and it is up to scholars to qualify what they mean when they use it.

A major cultural activity in Nishapur and the eastern parts of the Islamic world during the medieval period was quranic studies. The contributions of medieval exegetes working in the eastern part of the Muslim world have recently become the focus of increased scholarly attention, with the result that we are becoming more fully informed.¹³ It has become apparent that their work would prove to be pivotal in the history of the study of the Qur'ān. Al-Tha'labī and the school he belonged to—the Nishapuri school of quranic exegesis—which consisted of his teacher (Ibn Ḥabīb), himself, and his student (al-Wāḥidī)—played a decisive role in the development of quranic exegesis.¹⁴ It is unfortunate that the most significant personality in this movement, al-Tha'labī, has until now remained shrouded in mystery and his major work uninvestigated.

Al-Tha'labī: A Biography

The Sources

Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī was simply known as al-Tha'labī. He was never out of fashion either among medieval or modern scholars. Yet, there exists no satisfactory or exhaustive biography of al-Tha'labī and this chapter will attempt to fill the gap to allow for a better understanding of the man and his work.

The primary sources used in this study to reconstruct the life of al-Tha'labī stem from different genres. The earliest source to mention al-Tha'labī and give substantial information about his works was the autobiography of his most prominent student al-Wāḥidī (d. 486/1076). This autobiography, which constitutes a part of the introduc-

¹³ See now the extensive assessment by Claude Gilliot, "L'exégèse du Coran en Asie Centrale et au Khorasan," *Studia Islamica* (2000): 129–164.

¹⁴ It is my intention to offer a study of al-Wāḥidī.

tion of a yet unpublished work, describes the educational process that al-Wāḥidī, a medieval Nishapuri student, underwent. In the course of mentioning the teachers he studied with, he has occasion to dwell on his professor al-Tha'labī.

The second source chronologically and the most important is the biography of al-Tha'labī given by one of his fellow Nishapurians, al-Fārisī (d. 529/1135),¹⁵ who was active in the sixth/twelfth century, or a century after the death of al-Tha'labī. This is a detailed biography that attempts to do justice to the man and his works. Its importance stems from its role as the backbone for all the subsequent biographies of al-Tha'labī found in later biographical dictionaries. The third group of sources is the later medieval biographical dictionaries taken as a whole. Some 35 medieval biographical dictionaries supply an entry on al-Tha'labī. Although almost all the information found in these later biographies stems from al-Fārisī's biographical account, they do occasionally add some useful new information. Finally we have the works of al-Tha'labī himself which, although not autobiographical in nature, are a rich source of information about the opinions of the author.

In reconstructing the life of al-Tha'labī, I will follow, to the degree that is possible, the outline of the biography written by al-Fārisī. My aim in doing so is to present the life of a medieval scholar using the conventions of his age. This will allow for a complex reconstruction in which the frame remains traditional but the approach is critical. As it happens this biography is not only the earliest but also the most comprehensive. The information given by al-Fārisī will be compared with later bibliographical information and conclusions will be drawn from this comparison.

The first impression taken upon reviewing the biographical material available on al-Tha'labī is one of paucity. This could not be more misleading. Read carefully, medieval biographies can disclose an abundance of information about their subjects.

¹⁵ On the man and his work see Bullett, *The Patricians*, xi–xvi. See also the review by Iḥsān 'Abbās of Richard Frye's *The Histories of Nishapur*, in *The Muslim World* 60 (1970): 189–191.

Al-Wāḥidī's Autobiography

Al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076) was a new kind of Qur'ān commentator, both a first rate literary critic and an exegete.¹⁶ It is unfortunate that we do not have a monograph in English on this author.¹⁷ In the introduction to his unpublished magnum opus, *al-Basīṭ*, he recounts his intellectual history, mentioning the teachers with whom he studied and the books he read.¹⁸ His literature and prosody teacher, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Yūsuf al-'Arūdī (b. 334/945 and d. after 416/1025),¹⁹ was the one responsible for directing al-Wāḥidī to the study of quranic exegesis instead of literature. One day this teacher scolded him for devoting so much time to poetry and the profane sciences and urged him to "devote himself to the study of the exegesis of the Book of God." He added that al-Wāḥidī should study exegesis with "this man whom students from distant lands journey to seek out, while you neglect him despite the fact that he is a neighbor."²⁰ Al-Wāḥidī clarifies that by "this man" his prosody teacher meant "the teacher (*al-ustādh*), and guide (*al-imām*), Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī."²¹

We are never told why a prosody teacher would urge one of his students, a brilliant one at that, to transfer to another field and

¹⁶ His full name is 'Alī b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Wāḥidī. He wrote three different Qur'ān commentaries, the most extensive of which has not yet been edited. On him see Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam al-udabā'* (Beirut, 1923-1930), v. 12: 257-270. See also the study by Jawdat al-Mahdī, *al-Wāḥidī wa-manḥajuhu fī al-tafsīr* (Cairo, 1978). The fifth century saw the rise of this new breed of commentator, part literary critic, part exegete; they were the products of the *ijāz* theory.

¹⁷ See also Claude Gilliot, "Textes arabes anciens édités en Egypte," *MIDEO* 24 (2000), no. 66, pp. 183-186; Gilliot's reconstruction of al-Wāḥidī's life is based on Yāqūt's transcription of parts of the autobiography, see next note.

¹⁸ I have been unable to access the first volume of *al-Basīṭ*, which is also a Qur'ān commentary, and relied instead on the excerpts from the autobiography found in the entry on al-Wāḥidī in Yāqūt's *Muḥjam al-udabā'*, v. 12: 257-270; the same excerpts have been transcribed in the introduction of Aḥmad Ṣāqī's edition of al-Wāḥidī's *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Cairo, 1969), 13-15.

¹⁹ On this man, see 'Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī's *al-Muntakhab min al-Siyāq* (henceforward *al-Muntakhab*), abridged by al-Ṣarayfīnī, Muḥammad 'Abd al-'Azīz, ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1989), 186. He is described as the leading authority on literature as well as a Shāfi'ī. For detailed biographical references on him, see also al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūṭī, ed. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1990), v. 17: 389.

²⁰ Yāqūt, *Muḥjam*, v. 12: 264.

²¹ Ibid., v. 12: 264.

another colleague.²² The only connection that the sources enable us to envision between the two teachers (aside from the teaching profession) is that both were members of the Shāfi'ī legal school. Two eminent Sunnī professors living in the same city might very likely have crossed paths, (if they themselves had not studied with the same teachers) and it is conceivable that a friendship might have developed between the two.

Al-Wāḥidī's response to his teacher's exhortations was that he was studying literature and rhetoric to better prepare himself for exegesis. Eventually, he would end up studying with al-Tha'labī. The language that al-Wāḥidī employs when he speaks about his new teacher reads more like an encomium. Because this part of the autobiography is highly relevant I shall quote it in full:²³

Then I [i.e. al-Wāḥidī] attended the lectures of the teacher (*al-ustādh*) Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī, may God have mercy on him.²⁴ He was the best of scholars, nay their vast sea [of learning]; the star of the eminent scholars, nay their full moon; the adornment of the scholars, nay their pride. He was unique in the community, indeed the leader. He authored the Qur'ān commentary entitled "*al-Kashf wa-al-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān*", a commentary carried by mounts across the land and by ships over the seas.²⁵

The whole of the community, with its different sects, has unanimously acknowledged his eminence and recognized the brilliance of his works, which are incomparable. Those who have had the chance of meeting and studying with him recognize that he was matchless. As for those who have never seen him, it is enough for them to look into his works for them to infer that he was a vast sea and a deep abyss of learning. I have studied some 500 fascicles (*juz'*) of his works with him, including his large Qur'ān commentary, as well as his book entitled "*al-Kāmil fī 'ilm al-Qur'ān*" and others.

Three points make the information given here of primary importance. First, the account is contemporaneous with al-Tha'labī, making it the only such report. Second, it is written by one of al-Tha'labī's

²² Al-Wāḥidī's acumen as a literary critic is reflected in his renowned commentary on the collected poems of the great Arab poet al-Mutanabbī. This work was one of the earliest Arabic books to be published in Germany. See *Diwān Abī al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbī*, *Sharḥ al-Wāḥidī*, Fr. Dieterici, ed. (Berlin, 1871).

²³ The translation is based on the excerpts transcribed by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī in his biography of al-Wāḥidī. See *Muḥjam al-udabā'*, v. 12: 267-268. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

²⁴ Implying that this is being written after 427/1035, the death date of al-Tha'labī.

²⁵ Then he quotes a line of poetry to elaborate this theme.

students, in fact, his most illustrious. Third, it was not used by the biographical dictionaries in their entries on al-Tha'labī, and whatever information it contains is, thus, not found anywhere else.²⁶

The quoted paragraphs make it clear that al-Tha'labī was a well-respected scholar in his day. Indeed, his reputation was of such a caliber that he was sought after by students from around the Islamic world. They also imply that his commentary was already known and widely circulated during the author's lifetime or its immediate aftermath. We are also informed that al-Tha'labī wrote many books, two of which are mentioned by their titles. One is the Qur'ān commentary, the subject of this book. The other is a book on the sciences of the Qur'ān (*ulūm al-Qur'ān*). The loss of this work is unfortunate, for it would have provided us with a clearer articulation of al-Tha'labī's approach to the study of the Qur'ān. The "500 juz'" refers to sheer bulk and not titles, which is why I opted for fascicles as a translation.²⁷

Al-Fārisī's Biography of al-Tha'labī

As I have already mentioned, the earliest biographical dictionary offering an entry for al-Tha'labī is *al-Muntakhab min al-Siyāq* (or simply *al-Muntakhab*) by al-Fārisī.²⁸ The work was written sometime before 529/1135 the date of the death of the author and a century or less after al-Tha'labī's death. Al-Fārisī's informants were people who had met al-Tha'labī in person, among whom was his student al-Wāhidī. His entry on al-Tha'labī became the main source—if not the only source—for later biographies. The entry reads as follows:

²⁶ Although this section of al-Wāhidī's autobiography was quoted by Yāqūt in his dictionary, he did so in the entry on al-Wāhidī and did not utilize the information when he gave a biography of al-Tha'labī.

²⁷ This explanation finds confirmation in the way the word *juz'* was used at that time. Al-Tha'labī uses it to refer to fascicles. See *Qur'ānic Commentary in the Eastern Islamic Tradition of the First Four Centuries of the Hijra: An Annotated Edition of the Preface to al-Tha'labī's "Kitāb al-Kashf wa'l-Bayān 'an Tafsīr al-Qur'ān,"* Isaiah Goldfeld, ed. (Acre: Sruq Printers and Publishers, 1984), 51. Etan Kohlberg has this to say about the word *juz'*: "This word may refer to either (a) one gathering of sheets (often comprising some 20 folios, i.e. 40 pages) forming a separate (usually bound) booklet; or (b) one of a number of booklets bound together." See his *A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work: Ibn Tawūs and his Library* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 79. Asma Afsaruddin's translation of the 500 fascicles as "five hundred works" is a mistranslation; see her "Constructing Narratives of Monition and Guile: The Politics of Interpretation," *Arabica* 48 (2001), 330.

²⁸ Al-Fārisī, *al-Muntakhab*, 91.

Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ustādī Abū Ishāq al-Tha'libī,²⁹ an expert Qur'ān reciter and reader (*muqrī'*), exegete, preacher, man of letters, trustworthy authority (*al-thiqah*) and a man who knew the Qur'ān by heart (*hāfiẓ*).

He is the author of magnificent works including the Qur'ān commentary that incorporates a multitude of interesting things, be they interpretations, allusions, statements of the mystics (*arbāb al-ḥaqā'iq*), aspects of grammar and specimens of variant readings. Another work (of his) is *al-'Arā'is wa-al-qisas* and other works that do not need to be mentioned because they are famous.

He was sound and trustworthy in his transmission (of *ḥadīth*). He related (*haddath*) from Abū Ṭāhir [Muḥammad b. al-Faḍl] b. Khuzaymah, the Imām Abū Bakr b. Mihrān al-Muqrī', Abū Bakr b. Hānī and Abū Bakr al-Ṭarāzī. He also related from [Abū Muḥammad] al-Makhladī, al-Khaṣṣāf, Abū Muḥammad b. al-Rūmī, Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Naṣrī, Abū Zakariyā al-Ḥarbī, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Hamadānī al-Waṣī and other scholars belonging to their generation. He transmitted a large number of *ḥadīth* and had many teachers (*shuyūkh*).

He died in [the month of Muḥarram] 427 [i.e., November/December 1035].

Al-Wāhidī transmitted (*sami'a minhu al-tafsīr*) al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary, became his student (*akhadha 'anhu*) and spoke in laudatory terms of him.³⁰ Al-Wāhidī gave us [i.e. al-Fārisī] a certificate to transmit what he heard from his teacher.

This information was related to us by a group of people, one of whom was al-Wāhidī. A person I consider trustworthy related to me that the Imām, and the beauty of Islam, Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī³¹ (d. 465/1072) said: "I saw God, may He be exalted, in a dream. We engaged in an intimate conversation during which the Most High said: 'here comes the righteous man'. I turned around and saw that it was Aḥmad al-Tha'libī coming towards us." A story to that effect.

This biography is an excellent example of its genre because it supplies all the information a medieval Muslim scholar would have wanted to know about a fellow scholar: the full name, book titles, teachers, trustworthiness, peer evaluation, transmitters of his works, and death date.

²⁹ The question of the correct *laqab* (al-Tha'labī or al-Tha'libī) will be discussed later.

³⁰ This might be a reference to the autobiography we just quoted in which al-Wāhidī lauds his teacher al-Tha'labī.

³¹ On al-Qushayrī see *EI*², v. 5: 526-527.

Al-Tha'labī or al-Tha'libī?

The full name of al-Tha'labī, as given by al-Fārisī, has never been the subject of debate in subsequent biographies. The sobriquet (*laqab*) of al-Tha'labī, given here as al-Tha'libī, presents us with a problem. Since the majority of subsequent biographies of our author give "al-Tha'labī" (while al-Tha'libī is considered to be less authoritative), an explanation for this discrepancy is needed. The most obvious one is that we have here a corruption in the text. Unfortunately, because the manuscript of *al-Muntakhab* is a unicum, we are thus unable to verify whether it is an inadvertent substitution on the part of the scribe or an original spelling. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, copying this very biography, gives "al-Tha'labī", which would support the claim that we are dealing here with a scribal error.³² Yāqūt was an accomplished biographer, and if there had been a basis for a variant for al-Tha'labī he would have followed his custom of mentioning it. Yet this apparent scribal error has secured itself a place in later biographies of al-Tha'labī. The first to mention the two versions of the epithet side by side was Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1234), and a number of subsequent biographers followed suit.³³ This does not mean that all the biographers failed to realize that an error had crept into the picture. Al-Asnawī rejects the reading "al-Tha'libī" and attributes it to a confusion with a well-known contemporary of al-Tha'labī, who was known by the name of al-Tha'libī.³⁴ A confusion between the two did indeed occur in a 9th/15th century biographical dictionary.³⁵

The manuscript tradition of the Qur'ān commentary of *al-Kashf* is consistent in rendering the name as al-Tha'labī. Not one manuscript mentions him as al-Tha'libī. This, combined with the fact that his student refers to him as al-Tha'labī, makes it certain that his name was indeed, al-Tha'labī. It is also the name by which he is commonly referred to. Finally, the word "al-Tha'labī", most of the biographers stress, was a nickname (*laqab*) and not a tribal name (*nasab*).³⁶ This

³² Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam al-udabā'*, v. 5: 38.

³³ Ibn al-Athīr *Izz al-Dīn, al-Lubāb fī tahdhīb al-ansāb* (Beirut, 1972), v. 1: 238.

³⁴ Al-Asnawī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyah*, 'Abd Allāh al-Jabbūrī, ed. (Baghdād, 1970), v. 1: 330. The full name of al-Tha'libī is 'Abd al-Malik b. Muḥammad b. Ismā'il Abū Maṣṣūr. He was a man of literature and a historian who wrote many works which have been published; on him, see al-Ziriklī, *al-A'lam* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li-al-Malāyīn, 2002) v. 4: 163–164; *GA*, I, 284–287.

³⁵ See Ibn Qunfudh, *al-Wafayāt*, 'Adil Nūwayhid, ed. (Beirut, 1983), 237, especially the editorial remarks.

³⁶ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Lubāb*, v. 1: 238.

means that al-Tha'labī was of Persian descent and not a member of the Arab tribal group that carries that name. This also is another proof that al-Tha'labī is the original nickname, since only this form, and not al-Tha'libī, is identical with a *nisbah* formation of an Arab tribe.

The dates of al-Tha'labī

There is almost complete unanimity on the death date of al-Tha'labī. All biographies agree that he died in the year 427 A.H. in the month of Muḥarram or in November/December of the year 1035 C.E. Ibn Khallikān gives, in addition to the year 427 A.H., an alternative date for al-Tha'labī's death. He quotes an anonymous source that affirms that al-Tha'labī died in 437/1045.³⁷ The alternative date given by Ibn Khallikān was disputed by al-Asnawī, who points out that this was the result of a confusion and that the death date of al-Tha'labī is certain.³⁸ Furthermore, there is no evidence to support a later death date for al-Tha'labī; and unless new material surfaces there is no compelling reason not to follow the majority of medieval biographers as well as classical Muslim historians.³⁹

The sources have nothing to say about the birth date of al-Tha'labī, and it is impossible to be certain if we were to offer a guess. After analyzing some of the *isnāds* used by al-Tha'labī, Tilman Nagel proposed the late fifties of the fourth Hijri century as a possible date for his birth.⁴⁰ I am inclined to agree with this proposition. The uncertainty about the exact date of al-Tha'labī's birth does not change the fact that he spent the first part of his life under the rule of the Samanids, who were only ousted from Khurasan in 389/999. The remainder of his life saw the rise and demise of Ghaznavid rule in Khurasan.

Al-Tha'labī the Qur'ān Reciter and Reader

The string of epithets given after al-Tha'labī's name in the biography is significant, since they highlight different aspects of his activities.

³⁷ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yān*, Ihsān 'Abbās, ed. (Beirut, 1977), v. 1: 80.

³⁸ Al-Asnawī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyah*, v. 1: 330.

³⁹ Muslim historians consistently give 427 A.H. as the death date of al-Tha'labī. See Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah* (Beirut, 1977), v. 12: 774. Both Brockelmann and Nagel give 427 A.H. as the year of death.

⁴⁰ Tilman Nagel, *Die Qisas al-Anbiyā': Ein Beitrag zur Arabischen Literaturgeschichte* (Bonn, 1967), 81.

One has to admire the biographer's dexterity in presenting his subject and his achievements in so few words. These appellatives were pregnant with connotations for the medieval reader. In what is to follow, I will attempt to elaborate their significance to the modern reader.

Al-Tha'labī was accomplished enough in the science of the variant readings of the Qur'ān to be entitled to the name *muqri'*. *ʿIlm al-qirā'āt*, or the science of the variant Qur'ān readings, was a field unto its own; and being a commentator did not necessarily qualify one to be called a reader (*muqri'*).⁴¹ Indeed, not all Qur'ān commentaries deal with this aspect of the Qur'ān. The expertise of al-Tha'labī in Qur'ān readings has left its mark on his commentary. He systematically cites all the possible variants of a word and names their authority.⁴² Al-Tha'labī's stature in this field was sufficient to secure him an entry in the most important dictionary for Qur'ān readers, that of Ibn al-Jazarī.⁴³

In close conjunction with the knowledge of the variant readings of the Qur'ān comes the feat of memorizing it. Al-Tha'labī is also described as a *ḥāfiẓ*, implying that he committed the Qur'ān to memory. This was usually done at an early age, at the beginning of one's education. Its mention in the biography is meant to emphasize the command al-Tha'labī had of the different fields related to the study of the Qur'ān.

Al-Tha'labī as a preacher

Al-Tha'labī is also described as a preacher (*wāʿiẓ*). The veracity of such a characterization is confirmed by the admonitory nature of his works. In the introduction to his work *Tales of the Prophets* (*Qisās al-anbiyā'*), for example, he gives some of the reasons why God recounted the stories of the previous prophets in the Qur'ān.⁴⁴ On one hand, the stories were told, according to al-Tha'labī, to deter Muhammad's nation from committing the crimes and offenses of previous generations. On the other hand, the stories have an instruc-

⁴¹ On the science of quranic variants or readings see Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue et théologie en islam. L'exégèse coranique de Tabari* (Paris: Vrin, 1990): 135–164.

⁴² See more on quranic variants in Chapter Three when I discuss the sources of al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary.

⁴³ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāyah fī ṭabaqāt al-qurrā'*, Bergstraesser, ed. (Cairo, 1933), v. 1: 100 (entry no. 462).

⁴⁴ *Qisās al-anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1994), 2–3.

tive value, since they teach the Muslims politeness and civility (*ta'dībān wa-tahdhībān li-ummatihi*). Consequently, we are to understand that by retelling the stories again, al-Tha'labī was hoping to achieve the same effects God intended them to have. The book, according to K. Wagtendonk, is aimed more at inculcating morality than at indulging in pure storytelling.⁴⁵ In his discussion of this work Tilman Nagel emphasizes its edifying nature.⁴⁶ Yet perhaps the most significant reflection of his concern with preaching is his incorporation of admonitory material as constitutive elements of his quranic hermeneutics. In many ways, al-Tha'labī reaffirms the validity of the 'folk' or 'popular' understanding of the Qur'ān. He does not shy away from incorporating into his commentary the popular sensibilities that had come to be dominant among ordinary Muslims of his time. Chief among these sensibilities was the belief that the Qur'ān is a source of morality and good behavior. Section C of Chapter Six discusses this aspect in detail. Al-Tha'labī was joined by many commentators who will emphasize the admonitory aspects of the Qur'ān. Ibn al-Jawzī (510/1116–597/1200) is another example of a Qur'ān commentator who was also a popular preacher.⁴⁷ For Sunnism to survive, scholars like al-Tha'labī and Ibn al-Jawzī had to both lead and educate the masses of their supporters. Public preaching, the antithesis of authoring, was in this light unavoidable, and the intellectualism that was to become the mark of the newly constituted Sunnī scholarship found mitigation in this kind of pietistic populism.⁴⁸

As a man of literature

In al-Fārisī's biography al-Tha'labī is described as an *adīb*, i.e. a man of letters (*adab*). The term (*adab*) held different connotations at different times. In the words of the modern scholar Gabrieli, an *adīb* in the 3rd/9th century was a man who was "not only cultivated in

⁴⁵ Kees Wagtendonk, "The Stories of David in al-Tha'labī's *Qisās al-anbiyā'*," in *La signification du bas Moyen Âge dans l'histoire et la culture du monde musulman*, Robert Mantran, ed. (Aix-en-Provence: EDISUD, 1978), 344.

⁴⁶ Nagel, *Qisās*, 91, where he calls it "erbaulich."

⁴⁷ On his career, see McAuliffe, "Ibn al-Jawzī's Exegetical Propaedeutic."

⁴⁸ See also Jonathan Berkey's *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), and also his *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), especially chapter seven. Let us not forget that the early preacher, *qāṣṣ*, was indistinguishable from the early commentator, *mufasssīr*.

Arabic poetry and prose, in maxims and proverbs, in the genealogy and tradition of the *ḍjāhiliyya* and of the Arabs at a time when they were hardly yet Islamized, but broadened his range of interests to include the Iranian world with all its epic, gnostic, and narrative tradition, the Indian world with its fables, and the Greek world with its practical philosophy.⁴⁹ Can we detect all this knowledge in al-Tha'labī's works? Al-Tha'labī's relies heavily in his commentary on the philological tradition of Qur'ān commentary—what he calls "*kutub al-ma'ānī*", which would be roughly translated as the books of the people of grammar and semantics. The commentary is consequently overflowing with poetic citations (*shawāhid*), linguistic analysis, and grammatical discussions. This, however, does not in itself indicate the character of his literary erudition.⁵⁰ More reflective of his *adab* inclination was al-Tha'labī's view that his commentary was more than a place for grammatical analysis; it was also the place for *adab* material and snippets of wisdom. Al-Tha'labī was the first exegete to utilize the full potential of the literary material, and incorporated it in his commentary not merely as utilitarian grammatical material, but as an integral part of the hermeneutical exercise itself. *Adab* material (both as wisdom or pithy or poetic snippets) became part of re-enforcing or interpreting the word of God.⁵¹

That al-Tha'labī was involved in literary activities is confirmed in a later biographical dictionary, which quotes two verses of his poetry.⁵² The import of the two verses is pietistic and they express the author's reliance and trust in God's help in times of distress. Unfortunately, this biographer, al-Subkī, does not mention his source; hence it is unclear whether these lines stem from a collection of al-Tha'labī's poetry or are simply lines of poetry included in one of his works.

His trustworthiness in ḥadīth transmission

Al-Fārisī's biography of al-Tha'labī unequivocally affirms al-Tha'labī's trustworthiness in transmitting prophetic traditions. This is asserted

⁴⁹ *EF*, v. 1: 176.

⁵⁰ On books of this nature see Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 54.

⁵¹ On this aspect of al-Tha'labī's hermeneutics see chapter Five.

⁵² Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'īyah al-kubrā*, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Ḥulū and Maḥmūd al-Ṭanāḥī, eds. (Cairo, 1966), v. 4: 58. I offer a complete transliteration of the two lines here (*Ṭawīl*):

*wa-innī la-ad'ū Allāh wa-al-amru dayyiqun—alayya fa-mā yanfakku an yatafarraja
wa-rubba fatan suddat 'alayhi wujūhuhu—asāba lahu fī da'watī Allāhi makhrājā*

not once but twice, a sign that scholars held al-Tha'labī in high esteem in the field of ḥadīth transmission. Nevertheless, al-Tha'labī's trustworthiness is called into question in some later biographies. Yāqūt, who wrote not long after *al-Muntakhab* appeared, alludes to this controversy when he concludes his biography of al-Tha'labī with what appears to be an unnecessary remark on the fickleness of reputations in the field of ḥadīth transmission.⁵³ He adds no more, and unless one is aware of the controversy, one would miss this veiled defense of al-Tha'labī.

There were two reasons why scholars attacked al-Tha'labī's credentials in the field of ḥadīth. First, ḥadīth scholars did not accept the authenticity of the traditions about the merits one earns by reading certain chapters of the Qur'ān, what are known as ḥadīths about "*ṣaḍā'il al-suwar*" (merits-of-the suras).⁵⁴ These ḥadīths were considered so inauthentic that any scholar who chose to transmit them compromised his standing among the scholars. Al-Tha'labī transmitted a large number of these ḥadīths. Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), is reported to have said the following about al-Tha'labī: "There is nothing to criticize about this man's [knowledge] apart from the reprehensible act of incorporating [in his works] flimsy weak ḥadīths, especially the ḥadīths which he cites at the inception of his commentaries on each new sura [referring here to the *ṣaḍā'il al-suwar* traditions]."⁵⁵ It is important to note here that Ibn al-Jawzī did not aim to undermine the stature of al-Tha'labī as a scholar; he merely pointed out one failing. It is important to point out, however, that al-Tha'labī was not unique in incorporating this class of prophetic

⁵³ Yāqūt, *Muṣjam al-udabā'*, v. 5: 38. It is not clear who uttered the statement. My guess is that Yāqūt was quoting al-Tha'labī's student, al-Wāḥidī. If that is the case, then the controversy surrounding al-Tha'labī's trustworthiness had started soon after his death.

⁵⁴ The standard formula of such a ḥadīth would be like this: Whichever person who reads this sura would be spared hell, or given such and such good tidings. See the scathing remarks of Ibn Taymīyah on the weakness of such traditions in his *Muqaddimah fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, (Cairo, 1965), 32.

⁵⁵ As quoted by Ibn al-Taghribirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhirah* (Cairo, 1930), v. 4: 283. Al-Tha'labī related these traditions at the very beginning of his commentary on each sura. Brockelmann translates this remark of Ibn al-Jawzī in a way that conveys that al-Tha'labī transmitted weak traditions in the opening chapters of his Qur'ān commentary, a mistake generated because no manuscript of al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary was ever consulted by Brockelmann. The misunderstanding is also present in the translation of Asma Afsaruddin where she writes, "... which were extremely weak, especially in regard to the early sūras." See her "Constructing Narratives," 328.

traditions into his commentary. He might have been the first, but certainly not the only one. Thus, we have to assume that there is more at stake than the mere incorporation of dubious prophetic traditions that all agreed were harmless.⁵⁶

Even the arch-conservative Ibn Kathīr (Abū al-Fidā', d. 774/1372) who while critical of al-Tha'labī's knowledge of the prophetic tradition, did not dismiss him as an exegete.⁵⁷ He attributed the "fanciful material" (*gharā'ib*) prevalent in al-Tha'labī's books to his encyclopedic approach.⁵⁸ Al-Tha'labī in his view was simply a man who transmitted a stupendous amount of material, which inevitably led to an accumulation of ḥadīth of varying authenticity. The tone of Ibn Kathīr's biography is in no way disrespectful. Thus, on the whole, ḥadīth critics were aware of the failings of al-Tha'labī in one area, but that never affected his standing as an undisputed authority on quranic exegesis.

The second factor that caused some scholars to criticize al-Tha'labī's standing as a good transmitter was doctrinal. The Qur'ān commentary of the Sunnī al-Tha'labī was used extensively as a source by Shī'īs in their polemical disputes with the Sunnīs. The commentary is riddled with pro-'Alī traditions which the Shī'īs triumphantly brandished before the eyes of the Sunnīs. This was a huge source of embarrassment and unease, to no one more so than to Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728/1328), the arch defender of Sunnī Islam against Shī'ism. Ibn Taymīyah sought to undermine the arguments of the Shī'ites by dismissing al-Tha'labī as a non-specialist in the field of ḥadīth, and thus unreliable as a source. Criticizing al-Tha'labī for transmitting a genre of weak ḥadīth, the merits of the suras, was not sufficient for Ibn Taymīyah. Al-Tha'labī was, Ibn Taymīyah declared, not one of the experts in ḥadīth.⁵⁹ He portrayed al-Tha'labī as a naive scholar who indiscriminately collected all that he encountered in the books he read and then copied it into his commentary. To make his point clear

⁵⁶ Prophetic traditions that belonged to the admonitory type were not scrutinized the way legally oriented traditions were. Thus ḥadīth scholars were usually willing to look the other way when they encountered them.

⁵⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah* (Beirut, 1977), v. 12: 774.

⁵⁸ The context does not allow for a certain translation of the word "*gharā'ib*," for it could mean "outlandish material," or as a technical term it could mean prophetic traditions that are poorly attested.

⁵⁹ "*wa-laysa al-Tha'labī min ahl al-'ilm bi-al-ḥadīth*" see Ibn Taymīyah, *Minhāj al-sunnah*, Muḥammad Sālim, ed. (Riyadh, 1986), v. 7: 34.

he compares al-Tha'labī to a lumberjack working at night (*ḥātib layl*), thus collecting both good and bad wood indiscriminately.⁶⁰

Ibn Taymīyah's attempt to undermine the authority of al-Tha'labī was not, however, endorsed by other medieval Muslim scholars. As we have seen, other scholars were willing to criticize al-Tha'labī for transmitting weak ḥadīth, but they did not deny his excellence in exegesis. It is ironic that Ibn Taymīyah's evaluation of al-Tha'labī became more influential in modern times. One of the few modern Muslim scholars to discuss al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary is the Egyptian Muḥammad al-Dhahabī.⁶¹ He follows the example of Ibn Taymīyah and disparages the merit of the work in a blanket way. The use of al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary in polemical writings of the Shī'ites and Ibn Taymīyah's response will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

Al-Tha'labī the commentator

It is significant that the epithet *mufasssīr* (quranic commentator) is not given any greater emphasis or importance than the others by al-Fārisī, which reflects his assessment of al-Tha'labī's importance to his immediate followers. Al-Tha'labī, who had written on many topics, was still not seen as only a commentator. As time went by, however, scholars' evaluation of his work changed and one finds a more hierarchical appraisal of his significance. Thus "commentator" (*al-mufasssīr*) is the most conspicuous epithet used by later biographers. This reflects the growth of the importance of al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary in medieval scholarship in comparison to his other works. Indeed al-Tha'labī came to be known simply as the *mufasssīr*, "the Commentator."

The list of ten scholars

Al-Fārisī's biography gives a list of ten individuals from whom al-Tha'labī narrated (*ḥaddath*).⁶² The Arabic verb used by the biographer is usually, if not exclusively, reserved for the transmission of

⁶⁰ Ibn Taymīyah, *Muqaddimah fi usūl al-tafsīr* (Cairo, 1965), 32. Chapter Seven is devoted in part to Ibn Taymīyah's assessment of al-Tha'labī.

⁶¹ Muḥammad al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa-al-mufasssīrūn*, v. 1: 227-234.

⁶² For complete bibliographical information on each, see Appendix 2.

ḥadīth. The customary rendering of this term into English is 'narrated' or 'related'. Nevertheless, two individuals in the list are not transmitters of ḥadīth but specialists in quranic variant readings (*muqrʾ*). Thus al-Thaʿlabī could not have related ḥadīth from them; he could only have transmitted knowledge pertaining to their field. A more accurate translation of the verb *ḥaddatha* here is "studied and narrated." This rendering does justice to the nature of the educational system in medieval Islam, whereby one's teacher was also the authority from whom one usually narrated material. Al-Fārisī then remarks that al-Thaʿlabī was a man of extensive knowledge of ḥadīth (*kathīr al-ḥadīth*) and that he had many teachers (*kathīr al-shuyūkh*). This last remark is corroborated by al-Thaʿlabī's own statement that he had related material from more than three hundred *shuyūkh* (teacher).⁶³

How are we to understand the significance of this list? Are these individuals listed because they are important in themselves and hence show that al-Thaʿlabī transmitted ḥadīth from the most renowned authorities of the time? Or are they listed because al-Thaʿlabī related more from them than from other authorities? Judging from the list of authorities he transmitted from in his Qurʾān commentary, we can safely conclude that the ten do not represent the most frequently quoted transmitters cited by al-Thaʿlabī.⁶⁴ In fact, only one of the ten listed here appears as a transmitter in the introduction to his Qurʾān commentary. On the other hand, a careful reading of *al-Muntakhab*, the biographical dictionary from which this entry stems, reveals that some of these individuals were important in their own right and stood as representatives of their generation.⁶⁵ This however does not explain the appearance of names that seem to be little known or, in one case, unidentifiable. Thus it is difficult to determine the precise criterion for the selection of the names in the list. Finally, the fact that all the scholars listed died between 380 and 390 A.H. tempts one to view this primarily as a list of the school teachers of al-Thaʿlabī.⁶⁶ If this is the case, then this would explain why almost

⁶³ See his remarks in the introduction of *al-Kashf*, Goldfeld, *Qurʾānic Commentary*, 19.

⁶⁴ See Chapter Three for more details on al-Thaʿlabī's authorities.

⁶⁵ See for example entry no. 708 on page 226 where al-Khaṣṣāf is mentioned as representative of his generation (*samiʿ ʿan al-Khaṣṣāf wa-ṭabaqatih*); no. 710 on the same page where we encounter Abū Ṭāhir b. Khuzaymah. See also entries nos. 308, 309, and 326 for more occurrences of some of the names from the list.

⁶⁶ I owe this observation to Nagel. See his *Qisas*, 81.

none of them is quoted in the introduction to his Qurʾān commentary, which stems from a later period in his life.

Two names in the list deserve special mention here. The first is that of Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Mihrān (d. 381/991), known as Ibn Mihrān, the leading scholar of quranic variant readings (*muqrʾ*) of his time.⁶⁷ The claim that al-Thaʿlabī transmitted from this author is problematic on closer examination. On the one hand, there is no doubt that one of the major sources for variant readings of al-Thaʿlabī's commentary was a work by Ibn Mihrān, known as "*al-Ghāyah*." Yet, unlike the other works by contemporaries that he uses, al-Thaʿlabī did not transmit this work from the author himself.⁶⁸ Indeed, there is no proof from the chains of transmission supplied by al-Thaʿlabī to the works he cites that he ever transmitted directly from Ibn Mihrān.⁶⁹ What are we to make of this? There are two possibilities. The first is that al-Thaʿlabī did study with Ibn Mihrān, but for whatever reason he did not transmit any works from him directly. The second is that the author of the biography, al-Fārisī, made a mistake by claiming that al-Thaʿlabī was a student of Ibn Mihrān, a very unlikely suggestion. In any case the lost work of Ibn Mihrān has been preserved by al-Thaʿlabī.

The second scholar who deserves our attention is Abū Zakarīyā Yahyā b. Ismāʿīl b. Yahyā b. Zakarīyā b. Ḥarb, known as Abū Zakarīyā al-Ḥarbī (d. 394/1003).⁷⁰ The biographical dictionaries describe him as an *adīb*, a man versed in Arabic and Persian lore. There is also an emphasis on the fantastic in the knowledge of this man, for he is described as an *akhbārī*. The basic meaning of the root *kh-b-r* is to tell, and a storyteller was a man who specialized in relating wondrous (*gharāʾib*) and miraculous (*ʿajāʾib*) stories about the world. But what is more telling about Abū Zakarīyā is the assessment by scholars of ḥadīth of his untrustworthiness. He was deemed a man of dubious religious credentials. The accusation was that he was an innovator in religious matters, or of questionable doctrinal inclinations (the word used is *bidʿah*). We are never told, though,

⁶⁷ See Appendix 2 for the list of the teachers of al-Thaʿlabī for more details on Ibn Mihrān.

⁶⁸ See Goldfeld, *Qurʾānic Commentary*, 66, where the chain of transmission shows that al-Thaʿlabī received the work of Ibn Mihrān through an intermediary.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 65, where al-Thaʿlabī transmits from Ibn Mihrān through an intermediary.

⁷⁰ For the sources on him see Appendix 2, no. 9.

what exactly was heretical about him and the cryptic accusation of heresy makes it difficult to guess his doctrinal inclinations.

A careful reading of the biography of Abū Zakarīyā reveals a contradictory aspect that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. On the one hand, he is portrayed as a heretic, which makes him unreliable as a transmitter of tradition. On the other hand, renowned scholars are reported to have transmitted from him. How are we to understand this? Two diametrically opposite explanations can be offered. First, it is possible that the heresy charge was of late origin (in retrospect he might have appeared to be too deviant to fit into the Sunnī world view); since there was no denying the fact that scholars transmitted knowledge from him, a way was sought to explain why reputable scholars of ḥadīth would transmit from a heretic. Consequently, the heresy charge was leveled circumspectly (*‘alā bid‘atin fih*, or *wa-kāna fih biḍ‘ah*), and the refusal to specify its exact nature rendered it almost innocuous.⁷¹ In addition, scholars who transmitted from Abū Zakarīyā were portrayed as being left with no choice in the matter (*wa-ḥitja ilayh*), but we don't know why. A diametrically opposite explanation could also be true; i.e. the accusation of heresy, which was contemporaneous, was ameliorated to save the reputation of reputable scholars who had nevertheless transmitted from him. This last suggestion is less probable since only late sources ascribe heresy to Abū Zakarīyā.

One fact is nevertheless clear: Abū Zakarīyā, who from a Sunnī point of view was of dubious doctrinal inclination, was a source for al-Tha‘labī. As we will have a chance to observe later, he is not the only transmitter used by al-Tha‘labī who is doctrinally suspicious. It is thus important to keep in mind that al-Tha‘labī did cast a wide net by using an array of authorities for his works, 300 by his own count, some of whom harbored unsound Sunnī doctrines.

Al-Tha‘labī's teachers in quranic exegesis

None of the ten scholars enumerated by al-Fārisī was himself a commentator. But this does not imply that al-Tha‘labī did not have teachers in the field of quranic exegesis. Locating these teachers is not difficult if one peruses the introduction to his commentary. In

⁷¹ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām*, v. 16: 543; id., *Tārīkh al-Islām*, 381–400, 306.

the course of a discussion of the different approaches to quranic exegesis, al-Tha‘labī gives the work of his teacher (*shaykhunā*) Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥāmid (d. 389/998), as an example of a quranic commentary that was too long for his taste.⁷² Apparently his dislike was not of a serious nature, for notwithstanding these objections al-Tha‘labī used his teacher's commentary as one of his sources.⁷³ This work was most likely lost early on, since no reference to it can be detected in the medieval literature. Ḥājjī Khalīfah's entry on this commentary is derived directly from al-Tha‘labī's introduction and thus cannot be considered as an independent report.⁷⁴

It is rather unfortunate that we know so little about this scholar. The biographical dictionaries do not even state that he was an exegete. They mention that he was a scholar of law (*faqīh*); and since his biography is included in Subkī's dictionary we are to assume that he was, like al-Tha‘labī, a Shāfi‘ī.⁷⁵ ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥāmid studied theology (*kalām*) also. The famous theologian Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015) led the prayer at his funeral.⁷⁶ This shows the high esteem in which he was held, and it could also indicate that he was a fellow theologian. Nevertheless, we are not able to judge the man's quranic expertise nor the nature of his influence on al-Tha‘labī.

The most important of al-Tha‘labī's teachers in the science of exegesis and the one who most greatly influenced him was undoubtedly Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 406/1015).⁷⁷ Al-Tha‘labī's apprenticeship with Ibn Ḥabīb is purposefully highlighted by the biographers;⁷⁸ they attest that al-Tha‘labī was Ibn Ḥabīb's most special student (*wa-kāna al-Tha‘labī min khawāṣṣ talāmīdhīh*).⁷⁹

Who was this man then? Ibn Ḥabīb was the leading scholar in quranic exegesis and quranic sciences of his time in Nishapur (*imām ‘aṣrih fī ma‘ānī al-qirā’āt wa-‘ulūmihā*). A littérateur and a grammarian,

⁷² Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 18; Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, 182–183.

⁷³ Ibid., 51.

⁷⁴ Ḥājjī Khalīfah, *Kashf al-zunūn*, G. Flügel, ed. (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1858), v. 2: 369, where he states: “*Tafsīr ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥāmid qara’hu al-Tha‘labī ‘alayh*.”

⁷⁵ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyah al-kubrā* (Cairo, 1966), v. 3: 306–307.

⁷⁶ On Ibn Fūrak see *EP*, v. 3: 766–767.

⁷⁷ His full name is al-Hasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Hasan b. Ḥabīb Abū al-Qāsim. For the sources on Ibn Ḥabīb see Chapter Three. See also Gilliot, “L'exégèse du Coran en Asie Centrale et au Khorasan,” *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999), 139.

⁷⁸ Al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi*, v. 12: 239.

⁷⁹ Ibid., v. 12: 239.

he was also a historian who specialized in the history of early Islam (*maghāzī*, or the conquests history of Muhammad and the first Caliphs), Muhammad's biography, and tales of the prophets. The similarities between Ibn Ḥabīb and his student al-Tha'labī extended also to the field of preaching. Ibn Ḥabīb seems to have divided his life between instructing students and intellectuals (called *ahl al-tahqīq*) in scholarly settings and preaching to the commoners (*al-'awāmm*).⁸⁰

Ibn Ḥabīb wrote several books, the most important of which is no doubt his quranic commentary, known as *Tafsīr al-Naysābūrī*.⁸¹ Still unpublished, this work is all but forgotten. Neither Brockelmann nor Sezgin, apparently, were aware that some volumes of this work are still extant in Istanbul libraries. Modern Muslim scholars have also neglected the work despite its popularity in medieval times.⁸² Any comparison between the hermeneutical approaches of Ibn Ḥabīb and al-Tha'labī is thus out of the question until we have access to these volumes. Another unpublished work of Ibn Ḥabīb, entitled "*Kutāb al-tanzīl wa-tartībih*," is also in the field of quranic studies.⁸³ The work is concerned with the chronology of the units of quranic revelation as well as their provenance, whether Meccan or Medinan.

The third and the last of the works of Ibn Ḥabīb to reach us, '*Uqalā' al-majānīn*' (The Wise Madmen), has fortunately been published.⁸⁴ This book is a collection of stories about mad people who uttered words of wisdom. It has generally been regarded as beltristic rather than religious or mystical. This has long prevented a better study of this very important document. The work, I believe, is primarily a Ṣūfī treatise in the Malamātī tradition.⁸⁵ If this assumption is correct, then we have in this work a unique document, since

⁸⁰ Ibid., v. 12: 239–240.

⁸¹ On *Tafsīr Abī al-Qāsim al-Naysābūrī*, see *al-Fihris al-shāmil lil-turāth al-'Arabī al-Islāmī al-makhtūt*, 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān, *Makhtūt ā al-tafsīr* ('Ammān, 1987), v. 1: 128–129. This work is different from the other quranic commentary known also as *Tafsīr al-Naysābūrī* (the real title of which is *Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān wa-raghā'ib al-furqān*), which is by another author. See the introduction to Ibn Ḥabīb's work '*Uqalā' al-majānīn*', M. Baḥr al-'Ulūm, ed. (Al-Najaf, 1986), 7.

⁸² Al-Ṣafadī describes the commentary as being famous (*mashhūr*), *al-Wāfi*, v. 12: 239.

⁸³ See Salāḥ al-Khaymī, *Fahras makhtūṭāt Dār al-Kutub al-Ṣāḥibiyah*, 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān (Damascus, 1984), v. 1: 94–95.

⁸⁴ See note 81 for details about the work. See also P. Von Loosen, "Die Weisen Narren des Naisābūrī," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 27 (1912): 184–229.

⁸⁵ My assertion rests on the nature of the wisdom sayings these madmen utter; they are exclusively religious and exhortative in nature. In addition, the Malamatiyah were known in the eastern part of the Muslim world as the wise madmen.

we lack any early sources from this sect. By claiming that this work is a Malamātī document, I am in no way implying that Ibn Ḥabīb was a member of the sect. Nishapurian society was complex enough to foster individuals who took an interest in doctrines to which they did not subscribe.

The picture I have drawn of Ibn Ḥabīb would be a familiar one, the likes of which fills the biographical dictionaries of the time, were it not for a very peculiar detail that the biographers supply. Ibn Ḥabīb, we are told, was in his youth a Karrāmī who would later in life convert to Shāfi'ism. Before commenting on the significance of this information, let us present all the evidence about his doctrinal affiliation. The earliest biographies of Ibn Ḥabīb have nothing to say about his beliefs.⁸⁶ The first inkling that there was something suspicious about his doctrinal views is encountered in his biography by al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), who cryptically mentions that another scholar, al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, spoke ill of Ibn Ḥabīb (*takallam fih*).⁸⁷ Al-Ḥākim's slander appeared in a pamphlet that was read by al-Dhahabī. It is clear from the way al-Dhahabī relates the story that he is hesitant and uncomfortable about reporting what looked like slanderous gossip. He does not elaborate on the content of the criticism leveled against Ibn Ḥabīb, and leaves it at that. The silence of al-Dhahabī could mean that he was unable to defend the reputation of another fellow scholar, something Muslim scholars were not wont to do. Subsequent biographies are more forthcoming about the nature of the charge that seems to be at the basis of al-Ḥākim's attack. Ibn Ḥabīb, we are told, was a Karrāmī who later converted to Shāfi'ism.⁸⁸ Only the first half of this statement could be true. The conversion story is an obvious late attempt at rehabilitation. Ibn Ḥabīb has no entry in any Shāfi'ī biographical dictionary. A towering figure like Ibn Ḥabīb, were he a Shāfi'ī, would not have been missed by partisan biographical dictionaries. The absence of such a biography speaks against the veracity of the conversion story.

⁸⁶ See al-Fārisī, *al-Muntakhab*, 179–180.

⁸⁷ Al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī had a very difficult time with the Karrāmī mobs who harassed him constantly and sometimes prevented him from venturing out of his house. Thus animosity between him and a Karrāmī scholar is not only plausible but most probably inevitable. For details about the harassment that he suffered, see al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, 401–420, 132.

⁸⁸ Al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi*, v. 12: 239.

Once more we see al-Tha'labī depending on what appear to be doctrinally suspect individuals for his knowledge. Or perhaps we would be misjudging the situation entirely were we to view it as the authors of the biographical dictionaries do. Nishapur in the third and fourth centuries was, after all, a town teeming with different sectarian movements, and despite the rivalry and strife, none of these sects could claim the sole title to orthodoxy. Indeed, orthodoxy was being shaped—not adhered to—at that time. Ḥanafīs, Shāfi'īs, as well as Karrāmīs were all considered inside the fold of Sunnism. It was only later in the six/twelfth century that the Karrāmī movement would be ostracized. Thus to al-Tha'labī, a Karrāmī scholar was still a Sunnī. We do know for certain that al-Tha'labī was not bashful in voicing his opposition to sects he considered beyond the pale. Mu'tazilism was a sect he never tired of attacking, but nowhere do we find him attacking the Karrāmī. Thus, in analyzing the hermeneutical approach of al-Tha'labī, one should raise the possibility of a Karrāmī influence. I will have occasion to elaborate on this issue later in the chapter devoted to al-Tha'labī's hermeneutics.

Al-Tha'labī's student

It is unusual that a renowned scholar like al-Tha'labī seems to have had only one student that the biographical sources find worth mentioning. I have no explanation for this and the sources offer none, which perhaps implies that having one special student might have been more common than we are led to think. All the biographies of al-Wāḥidī stress that he was the special student of al-Tha'labī, and that he studied exegesis under his guidance.⁸⁹ The intimate relationship between the two is evident in the language of al-Wāḥidī's autobiography, which we have already analyzed. Al-Wāḥidī was a renowned scholar in his own right, who specialized in exegesis, literary criticism, and quranic sciences.⁹⁰ He had left three quranic commentaries, the most voluminous of which is still unpublished.⁹¹

⁸⁹ For some of the biographies of al-Wāḥidī see, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam al-udabā'*, v. 12: 257–270; Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāyah*, v. 1: 523; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, v. 3: 303–304; al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, v. 5: 240–243; al-Suyūṭī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīn*, 78–79.

⁹⁰ On al-Wāḥidī, see the study of Jawdat al-Mahdī, *al-Wāḥidī wa-manhajuh fi al-tafsīr* (Cairo, 1978); also the introduction of al-Sayyid al-Ṣaqr to his edition of al-Wāḥidī's *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Cairo, 1969), 9–38.

⁹¹ See Brockelmann for information on the works of al-Wāḥidī, *GA*, I, 411–412.

His importance to us, though, lies in his role as the transmitter of his teacher's corpus. The biography of al-Tha'labī by al-Fārisī highlights the fact that it was al-Wāḥidī who transmitted his teacher's commentary. Indeed, al-Fārisī, himself took an *ijāzah* (certificate) from al-Wāḥidī to transmit this commentary.

Al-Wāḥidī's role in preserving and transmitting the work of his teacher is substantiated by the assertions of the biographical dictionaries and is confirmed by transmission chains of the work. One of the oldest and the most complete copies of al-Tha'labī's commentary is transmitted on the authority of al-Wāḥidī.⁹² Yet, this did not mean that al-Wāḥidī had a monopoly on the transmission of his teacher's commentary. We have scattered evidence that others transmitted *al-Kashf* from al-Tha'labī.⁹³ But it is apparent that scholars sought to read the work with transmitters who took it from al-Wāḥidī, reflecting the official sanctioning by al-Tha'labī of al-Wāḥidī's transmission.

Finally, al-Wāḥidī is the last representative of a teacher-student chain of scholars in exegesis that constituted what I would like to call the Nishapuri school. The scholarly output of Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Tha'labī and al-Wāḥidī, not only spans a century but may be the best in its field.

Miscellaneous Information About al-Tha'labī

None of the biographers of al-Tha'labī refers explicitly to him as belonging to the Shāfi'ī school of law. Yet the mere incorporation of an entry on his life in a biographical dictionary for Shāfi'ī scholars leaves no doubt that he belonged to the *madhhab* (school).⁹⁴ His affiliation with the school was never disputed by any of the medieval biographers. We also find support for this information from his quranic commentary, which when discussing legal matters always gives the Shāfi'ī view.⁹⁵

Despite the ecumenical disposition of al-Tha'labī, he was a determined foe of the Mu'tazilīs. In the introduction to his quranic commentary al-Tha'labī vehemently scolds the Mu'tazilī adherents by calling them "a sect whose members are the people of religious

⁹² See Appendix 1 for more information on the transmission history of *al-Kashf*.

⁹³ On this point see the relevant section in Appendix 1.

⁹⁴ Al-Tha'labī has an entry in al-Subkī's and al-Asnawī's works.

⁹⁵ See Chapter Five for more details on this point.

innovations (*bida'*) and of heresies (*ahwā'*).⁹⁶ He then adds that he was advised to shun them and avoid their company. Finally, he states that one should not take them as authorities when it comes to religious knowledge. Al-Tha'labī's position regarding the Mu'tazilīs is one of censure and avoidance.

Later biographies gave prominence to the epithet *al-mufassir* (commentator) to al-Tha'labī's name.⁹⁷ This reflects the growing importance of his commentary among the scholars, a commentary that would be generally referred to as "the famous commentary that has a wide circulation."⁹⁸

The Books of al-Tha'labī

The popularity achieved by the books of al-Tha'labī may have contributed to the absence of a complete list of their titles, since biographers felt no urge to supply names of books that were already well known. Al-Fārisī sees no point in recounting more than one title since the others are, as he asserts, "famous."⁹⁹ Consequently, we do not know how many books al-Tha'labī wrote and in which fields. It is nevertheless clear from the wording of al-Fārisī that he was prolific. One would hope that eventually more of his books will surface as catalogues of manuscript libraries in the Middle East become more comprehensive. The following list of five titles is the result of a thorough search of the sources and the catalogues of manuscript collections. First the Arabic title will be given in transliteration, followed by an English translation. Finally, I will state whether the work has been preserved or lost, and describe its topic if possible.

1. *Al-Kashf wa-al-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, *The Unveiling and Elucidation in Quranic Interpretation*. This work of al-Tha'labī is the subject of this book.

2. *Qisas al-anbiyā'*,¹⁰⁰ *Tales of the Prophets*. This is one of the most famous books in the Islamic tradition due to its widespread appeal; the huge number of manuscript copies of the work testifies to this.

⁹⁶ Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 16.

⁹⁷ See for example al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-huffāz*, v. 3: 1090; al-Ṣafadī calls him first "the commentator," see *al-Wāfi*, v. 7: 307.

⁹⁸ Yāqūt, *Muḥjam*, v. 5: 36.

⁹⁹ Al-Fārisī, *al-Muntakhab*, 91.

¹⁰⁰ The original title of the work was apparently *'Arā'is al-majālis*. Unfortunately since no critical edition of the work exists, we cannot be certain of the exact title.

It contains the most widespread version of the classical Islamic rendering of the tales of the Judeo-Christian prophets as well as the Arabian prophets. The book has been published repeatedly, though none of these editions is a critical one. The work still enjoys an unparalleled popularity in the Islamic world. It is through this work that the name and fame of al-Tha'labī have survived the vagaries of time. The work has not received the attention it deserves, despite its being a mine of material. It was the subject of a chapter in Tilman Nagel's dissertation *Die Qisas al-Anbiyā': Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*.¹⁰¹ Jacob Lassner has demonstrated that the work can yield interesting results when subjected to careful literary analysis.¹⁰² Recently there has been renewed interest in al-Tha'labī's *Qisas al-anbiyā'* and an English translation is being prepared by William M. Brinner.¹⁰³

3. *Al-Kāmil fī 'ilm al-Qur'ān*, *The Complete in Quranic Sciences*. This lost work of al-Tha'labī has only been mentioned by al-Wāhidī. Judging from its title, it must have dealt with the then-familiar topics in the field of quranic sciences.¹⁰⁴ There is a reference in a work of al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) to an opinion of al-Tha'labī on quranic discourse (citing verse 65:1) that probably comes from this lost work, since the quotation is not found in al-Tha'labī's commentary on verse 65:1.¹⁰⁵ This would indicate that the work was still in circulation around 794/1392.

4. *Rabī' al-mudhakkirīn*, *The Spring of the Admonishers*. This is another of the lost works of al-Tha'labī which must have been available in medieval times, since it is mentioned by several medieval biographers.¹⁰⁶ It is difficult to guess the nature of the work precisely, and

¹⁰¹ Bonn, 1967, 80–102.

¹⁰² *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁰³ According to James Lindsay; see his "Ibn 'Asākir as a Preserver of Qisas al-anbiyā'," *Studia Islamica* 82 (1995), 56 note 36. The translation has meanwhile appeared. This article has an extensive bibliography on *qisas* material. See bibliography for Brinner's translation.

¹⁰⁴ For these topics see the contemporaneous work in Arthur Jeffery's edition of the previously anonymous work *Kutāb al-mabānī* in his *Muḥaddimatūn fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, second edition (Cairo, 1972). The author has been recently identified. See Claude Gilliot, "La théologie musulmane en Asie Centrale et au Khorasan," *Arabica* 49 (2002): 135–203.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, ed. (Beirut, 1987), v. 2: 246.

¹⁰⁶ Yāqūt, *Muḥjam*, v. 5: 38; Since it was not mentioned by al-Fārisī, later biographers must have had access to a copy of it in order to mention it.

the most one could claim about it is that it deals with admonitory topics. No citation has been located that could stem from the work.

5. *Kitāb yudhkar fih qatlā al-Qurʾān*, *A Book Which Mentions the People Killed by the Qurʾān* (henceforth *Slain by the Qurʾān*). This work was never mentioned by any medieval Muslim biographer of al-Thaʿlabī. I have recently found a reference to this work in the *ijāzah* (list of read works) of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalanī.¹⁰⁷ It was F. Wüstenfeld who rediscovered the work and drew attention to it.¹⁰⁸ It is now in the Leiden University manuscript collection and has been recently edited by Beate Wiesmüller as part of her *Magisterarbeit* at the University of Köln.¹⁰⁹ The work is a collection of stories about individuals who died as a result of reciting the Qurʾān or hearing its recitation. These deaths, argues al-Thaʿlabī, are a sort of martyrdom, and the people who died as a result of this experience are entitled to all the privileges that come with the rank of a martyr.

Judging from the content and the titles of these works, it is evident that al-Thaʿlabī divided his scholarly production between the fields of quranic studies and admonitory literature. For later Muslim scholars, however, al-Thaʿlabī was known first and foremost as a commentator. This is a justifiable development, for his commentary is not only his most voluminous work but also his most influential.

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalanī, *al-Muʿjam al-mufahras*, Muhammad al-Mayādīnī, ed. (Beirut, 1998), 112.

¹⁰⁸ *Die Geschichtschreiber der Araber und ihre Werke* (reprint of 1882 edition, New York: Burt Franklin), 60.

¹⁰⁹ *Die vom Koran Getöteten: Al-Thaʿlabī's Qatlā l-Qurʾān nach den Leidener Handschriften, Edition und Kommentar*, (Magisterarbeit: Universität zu Köln, 1996). I wish to thank Ms. Beate Wiesmüller for sending me a copy of her Magisterarbeit. Her edition and translation has been published meanwhile.

CHAPTER TWO

AL-THAʿLABĪ AND MYSTICISM

The life of al-Thaʿlabī in Modern Scholarship

It seems that the connection between al-Thaʿlabī and mysticism is now firmly established in the modern secondary literature.¹ He is either called a Ṣūfī outright, or is seen as a student of the circle of Abū al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad b. al-Junayd (d. 298/910).² The latter claim was started by Tilman Nagel, who unwittingly relied on a corrupt reading in the published *Tales of the Prophets* of al-Thaʿlabī. It has been picked up by most of the scholars who have dealt with al-Thaʿlabī since. This is one of the few new pieces of information put forward by modern scholarship regarding al-Thaʿlabī. Should the claim that al-Thaʿlabī is a Ṣūfī turn out to be true then we would have to reassess how we understand and approach our author. Before we delve into the topic of al-Thaʿlabī's relation to mysticism, a brief historical review of secondary literature on our author is in order.

The first biography of al-Thaʿlabī by a modern Western scholar was that of C. Brockelmann, which appeared in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.³ Despite its terseness, the article supplies the basic information available on al-Thaʿlabī to students of Islam at that time; it also summarizes the scholarly work done on al-Thaʿlabī at that time. Brockelmann gives the full patronymic of the author and calls him throughout the article by his nickname al-Thaʿlabī, without any reference to disputes over the vocalization. He then mentions two of al-Thaʿlabī's works, namely his quranic commentary

¹ See for example W. Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisāʾī* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), xvi; and Steven Wasserstrom, "Jewish Pseudepigrapha and Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ," in *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Interaction, Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, Benjamin Harry, John Hayes and Fred Astern, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), 239, where Wasserstrom states: "Tales of the Prophets was not the only masterwork by this great quranic commentator, who emerged from circles following the Baghdadi Sufi, al-Junayd."

² On al-Junayd see *EP*, v. 2: 600.

³ v. 1: 735–736. Admittedly, it was F. Wüstenfeld who first introduced the West to al-Thaʿlabī in his *Die Geschichtschreiber der Araber*, 60.

and his *Tales of the Prophets*. He offers a brief discussion of each work, accompanied by a summary of the scholarly work done on it. Brockelmann informs us that the quranic commentary, which once was widely popular, has been criticized by Muslim scholars for containing weak traditions. It has also been the subject of a commentary by Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Muẓaffār b. al-Mukhtār al-Rāzī (*scribens ca. 630/1233*).⁴ On the other hand, Brockelmann notes that a famous German scholar, F. Schwally, believes that the work is one of the best in its field because it uses many sources. The work, Brockelmann concludes, is all but totally forgotten by Muslims now and has never been printed. The other book of al-Thaʿlabī, *Tales of the Prophets*, has fared better; it has been published repeatedly and translated into the major Islamic languages.

This entry was in reality a more detailed version of the account of al-Thaʿlabī's life given in Brockelmann's earlier *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*.⁵ There he supplies an incomplete list of his books, the fifth of which is a work that was not written by al-Thaʿlabī.⁶ Thus not only medieval scholars were prone to confusion, but modern ones as well.

Israel Wolfensohn, who devoted a section of his dissertation to al-Thaʿlabī's *Tale of the Prophets*, did not discuss his life at all;⁷ Heinrich Schützinger, whose dissertation briefly discusses the same book, refers the reader to Brockelmann's work.⁸ The state of scholarship on al-Thaʿlabī's life would remain unaltered for about a half century. The

⁴ The title of this work is *Mabāḥiṭh al-tafsīr*, the manuscript is in Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyah, *Tafsīr* 348; the work is more of a notebook of a professor on certain traditions al-Thaʿlabī failed to mention or disputes over philological points or interpretive issues. Ibn al-Mukhtār's criticisms should not be compared or equated to those of Ibn Taymīyah. On Ibn al-Mukhtār al-Rāzī see al-Dāwūdī, *Tabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, v. 1: 86. We are informed that he was a Ḥanafī and a Qurʾān commentator. For his works see Brockelmann, *GAL*, v. 1: 414; *SI*, 735. Goldziher discusses one of Ibn al-Mukhtār published works in his "Katholische Tendenz und Partikularismus im Islam," *Beiträge zur Religionswissenschaft* (1914): 115–142.

⁵ See note 3.

⁶ The list of titles consists of: 1. *Kitāb ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qisās al-anbiyāʾ*; 2. Ein davon verschiedenes Werk über die vormuhammedanischen Propheten [this work should not be counted as an independent work as it is a selection from the previous one]; 3. *Kitāb al-kashf wa-al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*; 4. *Kitāb mubārak yudhkar fihī qallā al-Qurʾān*; 5. *Kitāb al-durrah al-fākhirah fī al-amthāl al-sāʾirah* [this is not a work of al-Thaʿlabī as I have already mentioned, the author is al-Thaʿālibī; see Chapter One for the confusion between the two authors.]

⁷ Israel Wolfensohn, *Kāb al-Aḥbār und seine Stellung im Hadīṭ und in der islamischen Legendenliteratur*, (Dissertation: Frankfurt am Main, 1933), 62–76.

⁸ Heinrich Schützinger, *Ursprung und Entwicklung der arabischen Abraham-Nimrod-Legende*, (Dissertation: Universität Bonn, 1961), 58.

task of reexamining the life of al-Thaʿlabī was undertaken by Tilman Nagel in his dissertation *Die Qisās al-Anbiyāʾ: Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*.⁹ Although the chapter which deals with al-Thaʿlabī is primarily concerned with his *Tales of the Prophets*, it supplies a short biography of our author. Nagel was the first to consult an unpublished work of al-Thaʿlabī (his quranic commentary) for the purpose of presenting a more comprehensive biography.

Nagel was not satisfied with a mere repetition of the data on al-Thaʿlabī available in the biographical dictionaries; rather he attempts (with mixed results) to go beyond the meager facts to reconstruct a continuous life of his subject. Unfortunately, he falls into the widespread mistake of demanding from the medieval biographies what they usually cannot supply. He tries to establish the birth-date of the author, although it was never stated nor can it be easily deduced with certainty. After careful analysis of the dates known in al-Thaʿlabī's life, he concludes that he must have been born at the end of the fifties of the fourth century (350).¹⁰ Ingenious as it may be, this investigation into the birth-date of al-Thaʿlabī fails to convey any significance to the reader. This is in part due to the complete historical isolation in which Nagel presents the life of al-Thaʿlabī. Likewise, his investigation of the exact birthplace of al-Thaʿlabī, which he decides was Nishapur, is unnecessary. Al-Thaʿlabī's teachers and students were from Nishapur; his name is never associated with other places, nor, contrary to Nagel's assertion, do we have any proof that he journeyed to study with scholars in other towns. Nishapur at the time of al-Thaʿlabī was a major learning center and a destination for foreign scholars and students who swelled the number of the indigenous community. Finally, al-Thaʿlabī was called al-Naysābūrī, which implies that he was a native of the town.

Nagel conclusively proves that al-Thaʿlabī wrote his book *Tales of the Prophets* after writing his commentary.¹¹ This had been suggested earlier by Brockelmann.¹² Nagel then elaborates on the reasons for

⁹ Bonn, 1967, 80–102. See also the brief sketch of al-Thaʿlabī's life in Brian Michael Hauglid's dissertation, *Al-Thaʿlabī's Qisās al-Anbiyāʾ: Analysis of the Text, Jewish and Christian Elements, Islamization, and Prefiguration of the Prophethood of Muḥammad*, (University of Utah, 1998), 17–18. Hauglid summarizes Nagel's biography of al-Thaʿlabī. Recently Asma Afsaruddin presented a biography of al-Thaʿlabī in her article "Constructing Narratives," *Arabica* 48 (2001): 326–329.

¹⁰ Nagel, *Qisās*, 81.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *El*¹, v. 8: 735–736.

the unpopularity of al-Tha'labī's commentary. One was the attack on al-Tha'labī's credibility and expertise as a ḥadīth transmitter; critics never failed to mention that he included many weak traditions in his commentary.¹³ Another probable cause according to Nagel was the heterodoxy of some of the authorities that al-Tha'labī relied upon in his commentary.

Al-Tha'labī and Mysticism

Nagel advances a third cause for al-Tha'labī's unpopularity, especially among the Ḥanbalī. He believes that al-Tha'labī's bad reputation stemmed from his association with mystic circles in Nishapur.¹⁴ Nagel goes so far as to claim that al-Tha'labī was a full-fledged Ṣūfī and a follower of the mystic path charted by the great master al-Junayd (d. 297/910).¹⁵ He bases this on a reference to al-Junayd by al-Tha'labī, who calls him 'our master' (*shaykhunā*). Among other evidence Nagel cites in support of the Ṣūfī connection is the dream anecdote found at the end of the biography of al-Tha'labī by al-Fārisī. There, as we recall, the mystic master al-Qushayrī sees God in a dream referring to al-Tha'labī as 'the good man'.¹⁶ The anecdote, argues Nagel, shows that al-Tha'labī was close to al-Qushayrī, and is thus a proof of the former's Ṣūfī inclinations. A third piece of evidence supposedly stems from a footnote supplied by the editor of al-Qifī's *Inbāh al-ruwāt*, who cites another biographical work which criticizes al-Tha'labī's mystic affiliations.¹⁷ I have been unable to find this footnote in the edition of *al-Inbāh*. Unfortunately, the work to which this footnote refers is unpublished and I am thus unable to verify this remark. I have also been unable to find the source of Nagel's statement (it is too specific not to have a basis somewhere), and none of the biographical works I have consulted mentions any such information.

¹³ Nagel, *Qisas*, 82.

¹⁴ Ibid. The real reason was the Shī'ī polemicists' use of al-Tha'labī. See Chapter Seven for more details on this issue.

¹⁵ "Er war nämlich ein Anhänger jener Richtung, die sich auf den Mystiker Junayd (gest. 297/910) zurückführte, der, wie auch Ta'labī selbst, Schafīit war."

¹⁶ See the dream in the above translated biography.

¹⁷ Nagel, *Qisas*, 82: "Gegen Ta'labī mystische Einstellung wird wahrscheinlich auch in dem Buch 'Rawḍāt al-ḡannāt fī uṣūl al-i'tiqādāt' des Aqlīṣārī (gest. 1025/1616) polemisiert, welches 'ein Kompendium der orthodoxen Ansichten gegen die Neuerer, besonders die Sufis' ist, worin Ta'labī ebenfalls erwähnt sein soll."

The final evidence that Nagel provides in support of al-Tha'labī's alleged mystical affiliation is the later small treatise *Slain by the Qur'ān* (*Qatlā al-Qur'ān*). This is a mere conjecture on the part of Nagel, since he did not read or inspect this treatise. Strangely, Nagel does not adduce al-Tha'labī's incorporation of Ṣūfī material in his commentary—perhaps the strongest evidence of his alleged mystical affiliations.¹⁸ Moreover, Beate Wiesmüller has argued, independently of Nagel, that the small book *Slain by the Qur'ān* should be classified among Ṣūfī treatises.¹⁹ She does not, however, explicitly state whether al-Tha'labī was a Ṣūfī. Nevertheless, her analysis of the work points to such a possibility.

Was al-Tha'labī really a Ṣūfī? To better answer this question it is important to spell out the reasons for calling someone a Ṣūfī; these are of two kinds: primary and secondary. The two primary reasons for calling someone a Ṣūfī are: first, because the sources call a person a Ṣūfī, or second because he has a biography in a Ṣūfī biographical dictionary.²⁰ However, in cases where neither of these two conditions is met, then certain secondary indications have to be present in order to justify calling someone a Ṣūfī. The person has either to have received a *khirqah* (the Ṣūfī cloak) from a master, or been a *murīd* (a novice), or have practiced *dhiḳr* (Ṣūfī devotional practices) or *samā'* (listening to such practices), or finally have been himself a *shaykh* (master).²¹

None of these indications are there in the case of al-Tha'labī. On the one hand, he has never been called a Ṣūfī by the sources, nor do we find a biography of him in any of the Ṣūfī biographical dictionaries. On the other hand, none of the secondary indications is there to support a Ṣūfī affiliation. Furthermore, the arguments adduced by Nagel in support of his assertion that al-Tha'labī was a Ṣūfī do not stand on further investigation. Following is a point-by-point refutation of his argument.

First, did al-Tha'labī really quote al-Junayd, and did he really call him "our master"? On further investigation, it becomes clear that Nagel is basing his argument on a corruption in the Arabic printed

¹⁸ Al-Tha'labī included mystical interpretations of many quranic verses. For the significance of this see section A in Chapter Six.

¹⁹ "Al-Ta'labī's Werk ist demnach der mystischen Literatur zu zuordnen. Innerhalb dieser reiht es sich in die biographisch ausgerichteten Werke ein, denn eine theoretische Abhandlung kommt im Qatlā l-Qur'ān nicht vor." *Die vom Koran Getöteten*, 31.

²⁰ Of course I am here referring to individuals who lived after the third century, after the establishment of Ṣūfīs as a recognizable group.

²¹ Al-Tha'labī's name is completely absent from any work related to Sufism.

text of *Tales of the Prophets*. The citation there, which reads in Arabic “*wa-kāna shaykhunā Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd yaqūl*”²² (and our master Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd used to say), should be emended to read “*wa-kāna shaykhunā Abū al-Qāsim b. Ḥabīb yaqūl*” (the underlined words are the affected words; note that the consonantal Arabic script for both words could be easily confused). This emendation is based on my examination of one of the oldest of the manuscripts of *Tales of the Prophets* known to me, the one housed in the British Library in London, as well as another manuscript from Istanbul.²³ Both manuscripts give the version I have supplied. This reading is also confirmed by the manuscript tradition of the quranic commentary of al-Tha‘labī, where the same statement is also present.²⁴ The printed version of the *Tales of the Prophets* is not a critical edition of the work; it is not even a bad critical edition. It is simply a printed copy of one manuscript, most probably of Egyptian provenance. Furthermore, the statement quoted as being uttered by al-Junayd is not a mystical interpretation of the quranic verse in question, which raises further suspicion about the attribution to al-Junayd. Finally, the tense of the verb in the sentence makes it clear that al-Tha‘labī was quoting a contemporary teacher, and not a deceased authority. Thus, the person al-Tha‘labī called teacher (*shaykh*) was Ibn Ḥabīb and not al-Junayd.

The dream anecdote, which is Nagel’s second proof for his argument, could be interpreted to argue the very opposite. A Ṣūfī master bestowing the mediocre appellation “righteous” upon a fellow scholar has a ring of irony that is unmistakable. Moreover, a statement issued by a mystic about the moral character of another person does not in itself constitute a clear indication of that person’s doctrinal affiliations. The most one could say is that al-Qushayrī held al-Tha‘labī in high regard.²⁵

²² Al-Tha‘labī, *Qisās al-anbiyā’* (Beirut, 1994), 374.

²³ British Library Or 1494, fol. 200(b) line 18. The manuscript is dated 513/1119, see *Subject Guide to the Arabic Manuscripts in the British Library*, 236. See also the TopKapi Saray manuscript, III Ahmet, 78 (catalogued wrongly as a volume of *al-Kashf*; in reality it is a manuscript of *Tales of the Prophets*), fol. 303(a) line 1. This manuscript stems from 964/1556. One does hope that soon we will have a critical edition of *Tales of the Prophets*. The translation by William Brinner is based on the available printed text. See his *‘Arā’is al-Majālis fī Qisās al-Anbiyā’* or “*Lives of the Prophets*” (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 628.

²⁴ Al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf*, M100, fol. 46(a), sub 3:39.

²⁵ On the prevalence of dreams in biographical dictionaries see Leah Kinberg, *Morality in the Guise of Dreams* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 39–41.

The last proof I want to refute is the one based on the genre of the short treatise of al-Tha‘labī *Slain by the Qur’ān*. Nagel, who did not examine the work, based his argument for its relevance to his thesis on conjecture from the title. He fell into the oft-misleading assumption that extreme religious piety in medieval Muslim societies was something reserved for Ṣūfī adherents. In the case of al-Tha‘labī this assumption could not be more mistaken. B. Wiesmüller’s analysis of the work, on the other hand, is detailed and deserves careful refutation.²⁶ Her assertion that the treatise belongs to mystical literature will be proven to be incorrect. But first, a brief description of the treatise and its contents is in order.

Slain by the Qur’ān is a collection of stories about individuals who are said to have died when they heard the Qur’ān being recited. The narration is usually confined to the last moments of the hero’s life, enough to portray the incident of the hearing of the Qur’ān and the hero’s subsequent death. The stories show how the deep religious sensibility of these individuals was so stirred by the Qur’ān that it caused their death. The work consists of a short introduction that also incorporates the story of a young man who dies when he hears the Qur’ān. This is the only story that is commented upon and analyzed by the author. Then follow the 19 remaining stories with no further editorial comments. A typical story runs as follows: a wandering narrator meets a praying, God-fearing, and poorly dressed man. The narrator then proceeds to recite some verses of the Qur’ān, which recitation invariably causes the listener to die. Each story is preceded by its *isnād*, or chain of transmitters leading from al-Tha‘labī to the narrator.

The main reason for placing al-Tha‘labī’s treatise in the mystical literary tradition was, according to Wiesmüller, the resemblance between the subject matter of the treatise and the content of some Ṣūfī works.²⁷ Since many Ṣūfī treatises contain stories of individuals who swooned or fainted or even died after hearing the recitation of the Qur’ān, a treatise, she argues, that exclusively recounts stories of individuals who die when hearing the Qur’ān should also be counted as mystical. Two other factors that Wiesmüller overlooks add weight

²⁶ Recently Navid Kermani studied the work in his *Gott ist schön: Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999), 365–425. Since his analysis is more or less based on that of Wiesmüller, I will confine myself to a discussion of her work.

²⁷ Wiesmüller, *Die vom Koran Getöteten*, 30–31.

to her argument. First, the treatise was transmitted and preserved by Ṣūfī circles and the two extant manuscripts of the work are each found in collections (*majmūʿ*) of Ṣūfī treatises. Second, a few of the individuals who die are mystics. But this second point is weakened by the fact that al-Thaʿlabī never uses the word Ṣūfī in his treatise.

Nevertheless, there is insufficient justification for labeling the treatise as mystical, for it diverges significantly from any mystical treatise we know about. It is neither a theoretical treatment of mystical ways, nor a biographical dictionary of mystics.²⁸ Indeed, by designating it as a mystical treatise we forfeit a great opportunity to investigate the position of al-Thaʿlabī towards the Qurʾān. We also are bound to obliterate the friction between competing pietistic sensibilities of high medieval Islamic culture.

Before we decide on the genre of the treatise, though, it is important here to analyze its content, structure, and aims. First, by portraying the death of certain Qurʾān listeners in glowing terms, al-Thaʿlabī was taking for granted the lawfulness of the behavior leading to such deaths (i.e. extreme emotional reactions to hearing the Qurʾān: almost invariably the victims in *Slain by the Qurʾān* faint first; then, after regaining consciousness and hearing the Qurʾān for a second time, they expire). We know that swooning and fainting—to say nothing of dying—experienced as a result of hearing the Qurʾān were hotly disputed acts. The echo of that debate is manifest in the literature of *faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* (the merits of al-Qurʾān). There, such behavior is condemned and declared unlawful.²⁹ The most one was allowed is weeping.³⁰ Indeed al-Thaʿlabī himself once held such a conservative view. In his commentary on verse 39:23³¹

²⁸ Wiesmüller's assertion that it is a biographical work in the mystic scholarly tradition is unsustainable. The stories are not biographies; they are stories that tell how certain individuals died.

²⁹ Abū ʿUbayd al-Harawī, *Kitāb faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, Marwān ʿAṭīyah et al., ed. (Damascus, 1995), 214–215. The title of the chapter is "*Bāb al-qārī yuṣʿaq ʿinda qirāʾat al-Qurʾān wa-man kariḥ dhālika wa-ʿābahi*" (A chapter on a reader of the Qurʾān who is stunned when reading it and those who disapproved of that and despised such acts). The first group to be attacked for its excessive veneration of the Qurʾān was the Khawārij movement. This attack is documented in the *faḍāʾil* literature. See Abū Bakr al-Faryābī, *Kitāb faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, Yūsuf Jibrīl, ed. (al-Riyāḍ, 1989), 241–261.

³⁰ The debate over the proper reaction to the hearing of the Qurʾān was still alive during Ibn Taymiyyah's life, see Th.E. Homerin, "Ibn Taimīya's Al-Ṣūfiyyah wa-al-ṣuqarāʾ," *Arabica* 32 (1985): 224–225.

³¹ The verse reads, "God has now revealed the best of scriptures, a Book uniform in style proclaiming promises and warnings. Those who fear their Lord tremble with awe at its revelations and their skins and hearts melt at the remembrance of God."

he quotes only traditions that condemn swooning and fainting experienced as a result of hearing the Qurʾān recited.³² Of the many traditions that he quotes, one is attributed to the Companion Ibn ʿUmar who accuses such a swooner of being possessed by the devil himself (*inna al-shayṭān yadkhul fī jawf ahadihim*).³³ Ibn ʿUmar finishes his statement by reminding people that the companions of Muhammad did not behave like that, implying that this swooning was an innovation and thus unlawful. These contradictory views could only mean that al-Thaʿlabī must have undergone a change of heart about this matter. Consequently, he could only have written this treatise after writing the quranic commentary. We have in this instance an example of an intellectual development in the views of al-Thaʿlabī that can be documented from his own work.

One of the purposes of the treatise was, then, to argue against the old view that frowned upon extreme manifestations of emotions when hearing the Qurʾān. However, the thrust of the argument of this treatise was to grant these individuals the prestigious rank of martyrdom. Al-Thaʿlabī asserts in his introduction that individuals who die from listening to the Qurʾān or reading it are "the best of martyrs and the noblest of scholars." He also argues that they "have attained the highest of (religious) positions and the most sublime of ranks" for they "knew it (the Qurʾān) truly, and understood it perfectly."³⁴ These statements are very problematic, to say the least. Al-Thaʿlabī is arrogating the rank of martyr and scholar to those individuals on the basis of the nature of their death. This view has no foundation whatsoever in medieval Islamic dogma as it stood then; and al-Thaʿlabī fails to support his arguments with even a single tradition or a quranic verse.

Martyrdom in the Qurʾān is a rank given to those who die fighting in the path of God.³⁵ In later Muslim centuries it would be enlarged to include certain other categories, such as accidental death or other violent ends, but never before al-Thaʿlabī's treatise was it accorded

³² Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kāshf*, M105, fols., 6–7.

³³ Ibid., fol. 6(b).

³⁴ Leiden University, Or. 998 (2), fol. 3 (b): "*yashitamil ʿalā dhikr qawmin hum afdal al-shuhadāʾ wa-ashraf al-ʿulamāʾ nālū ʿalā al-manāzil wa-adrakū asnā al-marātib, wa-hum alladhīn qatalahum al-Qurʾān lammā qaraʾūh aw samīʾūh yutlā, fa-ʾahmūh haqq ʾilmih wa-fahimūh haqq fahmih.*"

³⁵ On martyrdom see Albrecht Noth, *Heiliger Krieg und heiliger Kampf in Islam und Christentum* (Bonn: Ludwig Röhrscheid Verlag, 1966), 25–29.

to people who die because of hearing or reciting the Qur'ān.³⁶ When mystics made use of the martyrdom rank they gave it to people who die out of divine love.³⁷ Likewise the status of scholar which al-Tha'labī bestows on these "martyrs" was one reserved for those who were versed in the study of the prophetic tradition, law, and of the word of God. But this knowledge is something acquired from studying with other scholars and not from self-endeavor or mere piety. Al-Tha'labī did not have much support from textual evidence. To counterbalance the absence of scriptural evidence in support of his views, al-Tha'labī fashions his treatise in the shape of a collection of prophetic traditions (*Sunan*). Each story is preceded by its chain of transmission leading to its narrator, and each story acts as a reinforcing precedent that validates the new custom. Al-Tha'labī is conscious of the legitimizing purpose of his endeavor, for he asks the reader to follow the example set by the individuals in these stories: "Be O peruser of our book from amongst those who follow their example in good deed; and love them by your heart and tongue; for if you do so you will be with them in paradise."³⁸ By mimicking the structure of a collection of prophetic traditions al-Tha'labī is using an established legitimizing tool to advance his innovative views.

Another stratagem used by al-Tha'labī to support his position was through the authority of dreams. Scholars have already shown the importance of dreams in legitimizing innovations in medieval Islamic culture.³⁹ Such dreams have been called "legitimizing-edifying dreams" by Leah Kinberg, who describes their function as follows:

[These dreams] can be found widely throughout Islamic literature. These are dreams that instruct people on how to behave, think, or react to definite situations in their daily lives. Most of these dreams show how deeds performed by people during their life on this earth correlate with their condition after death in the next world. They demonstrate the merits of each deed, thus encouraging people to act accordingly.⁴⁰

³⁶ I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern, trans. (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1971), v. 2: 350–355.

³⁷ A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 136.

³⁸ Al-Tha'labī, *Qallā*, Or. 988 (2), f. 4 (a–b): "fa-kun ayyuhā al-nāzir kitābanā hādihā min muttabi'ihim bi-al-ḥsān wa-muḥibihim bi-al-qalb wa-al-lisān, takun ma'ahum fi al-jinān."

³⁹ The literature on dreams in Islamic culture has become extensive. See the bibliography under Leah Kinberg, *Morality in the Guise of Dreams* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

⁴⁰ Leah Kinberg, "The Legitimization of the Madhāhib through Dreams," *Arabica* 32 (1985): 48.

The first story in al-Tha'labī's collection ends with a dream in which the deceased man appears to the narrator in great splendor. In amazement, the narrator asks the dead man about his fate. He answers that God has given him a reward that surpasses the one given to the people who died fighting with the Prophet in the Battle of Badr. He adds that, while those people were killed by the sword of the unbelievers, he himself was killed by the sword of God: the Qur'ān. Al-Tha'labī was thus according to individuals who die because of the Qur'ān a rank far superior to those who die fighting. It is even superior to the most revered martyrs of Islam, the people who died fighting in the first battle that secured the prosperity of the newly founded Muslim community. This claim is supported by a dream which acts as an *ersatz* revelation.⁴¹

The treatise, then, should be seen as an attempt by al-Tha'labī to raise the importance of the act of reading the Qur'ān and render that act of central religious significance. For the main corollary of the statement that to be killed by reading the Qur'ān is martyrdom (*shahādah*) is that reading the Qur'ān is *jihād* (holy strife). Thus, *jihād*, one of the most lauded acts a Muslim can perform, lies in the simple act of reading his Qur'ān. Indeed, I would argue that this treatise represents the apex of a development that attempts to place the Qur'ān at the center of a Muslim's life. True, the Qur'ān is the book of Islam, but its position is in a way peripheral to the cultic life of a Muslim. To be a Muslim, one has to perform the five pillars of Islam: the confession of faith, prayer, fasting, alms-giving, and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca. The Qur'ān is thus in a paradoxical situation: it is the basis of the newly founded community, but it has a marginal position in the rituals and does not figure greatly in the cultus of the new Islamic piety.⁴² One could live an exemplary Islamic way without ever touching the Book, a paradox for the religion of Islam. One of the central issues in the history of early Muslim

⁴¹ For the tradition that states that a dream is a kind of prophecy, see M.J. Kister, "The Interpretations of Dreams," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974): 70.

⁴² Belief in the books of God as part of the Muslim dogma is too vague to impact religious life. Muslims believed that the Torah and the Injil were books of God, yet that did not secure these books any authority because of the belief that they have been corrupted. The uncreatedness of the Qur'ān, like its inimitability, was a dogma created to secure the Qur'ān its authority. The only modern scholar to notice this peculiarity is Angelika Neuwirth. See her "Vom Rezitationstext Über die Liturgie zum Kanon," in *The Qur'ān as Text*, Stefan Wild, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 69–105, esp. 78–82.

theology is, I argue, the status and function of the Qur'ān within the cultic life of Muslims. Moreover, martyrdom through war (*jihād*) in fourth/tenth century Nishapur was all but impossible. The Turks on the eastern frontiers had been all but converted, and individuals eager to join battle with the infidels would have had to cross the whole length of the Islamic world to reach Byzantine borders. The Samanids had, with their astute policy, made life very comfortable for their subjects and few wars were fought until the rise of the Ghaznavids. Thus, the search for a new definition for martyrdom was necessitated by the political tranquility of the Samanid State.

Another factor that argues against the Ṣūfī affiliation of the treatise is the background of the protagonists of the stories. Although some of the individuals in al-Tha'labī's treatise are mystics, the majority are not. Of the non-mystics there is one who was not even a Muslim (the story of the Bedouin); another is a debaucher, and yet both managed to die when hearing the Qur'ān. Thus, the criteria for understanding the Qur'ān and experiencing death is not a privilege for the mystics only. Even non-humans are able to experience the beauty of the Qur'ān; several jinn die when they hear the recitation of the holy book. (Cf. with Qur'ān 46:29 and 72:1).

Moreover, the functions of the stories in mystical literature and in al-Tha'labī's treatise are diametrically different. In mystical treatises, stories about individuals who die when they hear the Qur'ān constitute a minor part of the chapters on *samā'*, and usually take an insignificant role in the presentation.⁴³ The emphasis there is on the phenomena of *samā'* as part of the mystic path, and not on the value of the understanding of the Qur'ān alone. On the other hand, al-Tha'labī's collection of stories about people killed by the Qur'ān and his claim that these individuals represent the pinnacle of piety show that he was elevating the Qur'ān to a unique position in a pious Muslim's life. Indeed, one could argue that al-Tha'labī was trying to reserve for the Qur'ān the experience mystics undergo during the *samā'* or other forms of non-official liturgical material (*dhikr*, poetry, wisdom sayings, etc.).

Finally, the treatise *Qatlā al-Qur'ān* fits well with the activity of al-Tha'labī as a quranic scholar who gave great attention to traditions on the merits of reading individual chapters of the Qur'ān (*ṣaḍā'il*

⁴³ See the *Kitāb al-samā'* in *Kitāb al-luma'* of al-Sarrāj, R.A. Nicholson, ed. (London: E.J. Brill, 1914), 267–300 esp. 280.

al-Qur'ān).⁴⁴ Indeed, al-Tha'labī was one of the few commentators to systematically incorporate these traditions in his commentary, a practice which eventually brought him the censure of other scholars. Reading of the Qur'ān becomes a central act of devotion on the basis of these traditions. Furthermore, if people who die reading the Qur'ān are martyrs, then naturally the act leading to that death (reading or listening to the Qur'ān) is *jihād* (holy strife). Thus, one could argue that al-Tha'labī, a quranic specialist, was writing a book that adds to the prestige and importance of the Qur'ān in the spiritual lives of the Muslims by hinting that *jihād* is achieved through the reciting or listening to God's Book. This directly added to the prestige of the Qur'ān readers themselves. The treatise *Slain by the Qur'ān* should thus be seen as a continuation of the genre of merits of the Qur'ān books and not as a mystical treatise.

While all the evidence suggests that al-Tha'labī was not a Ṣūfī, his writings show that he was very receptive to mystical influences. His quranic commentary is unique in the medieval tradition in consciously incorporating a mystical level of interpretation, besides the linguistic and tradition-based ones. Yet mysticism, like everything al-Tha'labī availed himself of, was put in the service of the word of God, which according to al-Tha'labī enabled Muslims to achieve the deepest connection to Him.⁴⁵

Finally, Nagel and Wiesmüller are not unique in claiming that al-Tha'labī was a Ṣūfī; some medieval Muslim readers have done that before. On the title pages of one of the manuscripts of *al-Kashf*, a certain 'Abd Allāh b. 'Uthmān b. Mūsā, asserts that al-Tha'labī was a mystic (*wa-al-imām al-madhkur 'alamun fī al-lughāt wa-al-adabiyat wa-al-taṣawwuf*).⁴⁶ He rests his claim on the fact that al-Tha'labī was a contemporary of al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) and heard ḥadīth and transmitted from him (alluding to al-Tha'labī's use of the commentary of al-Sulamī).

⁴⁴ See Chapter Five, section A, for more on *ṣaḍā'il al-Qur'ān*.

⁴⁵ See the prophetic tradition cited by al-Tha'labī in the chapter "On the merit of the Qur'ān and of its People, and on the merit of reciting it" (*Bāb fī ṣaḍl al-Qur'ān wa-ahlīh wa-tilāwātih*) which states that "... and those who read all the Qur'ān will be given the whole full of prophecy" (*wa-man qara' al-Qur'ān kullah ūtiya al-mubūwata kullahā*), M98, fols. 14(b)–15(a).

⁴⁶ See the title page of the Chester Beatty Arabic manuscript no. 3617.

CHAPTER THREE

AL-THA'LABĪ'S QUR'ĀN COMMENTARY: SOURCES AND STRUCTURE

Scholarship at the end of the fourth/tenth century in Nishapur, like everywhere in the Islamic world, had become self-conscious and all too aware of the legacy bequeathed by previous generations. Introductions and prefaces for new works were becoming veritable summaries of the accumulated scholarship in their respective fields, as well as the place where the merit and value of previous works was discussed.¹ Al-Tha'labī's introduction to his Qur'ān commentary is no exception, and scholars have long recognized its importance in shedding light on the early history of quranic commentary.² In the introduction, al-Tha'labī provides a detailed description of the sources for his commentary.³ The meticulousness with which he recorded his sources, both written and oral, makes it feasible to document in detail the works he consulted and used. This chapter will be devoted to an analysis of these works and the significance of his choices and the implication of the survival of *al-Kashf* for the history of early quranic exegesis. Since many of these sources have since been lost, al-Tha'labī's commentary takes on added significance as a work that has preserved early material that is no longer available.

¹ The best example that comes to mind is the introduction of al-Azharī (d. 370/980) to his monumental dictionary *al-Tahdhīb fī al-lughah*. Cf. the statement of Wolfhart Heinrichs, "One might say, albeit with a grain of salt, that it is in the fourth/tenth century that the various fields of intellectual pursuit within Islam come of age. The traditions that had steadily been growing during the preceding two centuries now begin to reflect upon themselves: commentaries, compilations, and handbooks make the available material accessible by clarifying or organizing it, uṣūl-works are being written to determine the underlying structure of several disciplines (fiqh, nahw, ḥadīth and possibly also lughah) . . ." in his "Contacts Between Scriptural Hermeneutics and Literary Theory in Islam: The Case of Majāz," *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaft* 7 (1991–92), 253.

² Indeed, Isaiah Goldfeld's edition of a part of this introduction is a reflection of the conviction held among modern scholars of its significance.

³ He also expounds on his hermeneutical approach, the discussion of which I will deal with in Chapter Four.

The proliferation of books during the course of the fourth and fifth centuries forced writers to offer justifications for writing new works. The old trick—"I wrote the book under the urgent pleading of my fellow friends"—had become too tattered to suffice as a cover. Nevertheless, scholars were still using it and al-Tha'labī in the introduction to his commentary does mention "the request of some outstanding jurists (*fuqahā*), erudite scholars (*ulamā*), and honorable dignitaries" as a reason for writing the work, but that was not the main motive.⁴ Dissatisfaction with the state of quranic commentary, he informs us, was the deciding factor that motivated him to write his commentary. He finishes his apologia by spelling out what one should expect from any new work in an already established field in order for it to be worth the reader's attention. The standards he proposes are relevant even from a modern perspective:

It is incumbent upon the author of a new work in an already established field to make sure that his work has one of the following features (*khiṣāl*), features that I shall now enumerate: the work should either discover things that were overlooked, or collect that which was scattered, or explain that which is obscure, or organize and systematize [that which was not so]; or the work should discard material [in previous works] which is deemed unnecessary or digressive. I hope that my work will manage to achieve all of the above. May God help me finish it.⁵

1. Sources

I know of no author in quranic interpretation that has listed his sources as meticulously as has al-Tha'labī. Moreover, al-Tha'labī's list is unique among introductions in quranic exegetical literature since he provides not only the titles but also the chains of transmission through which these works reached him. By listing titles and recording the chain of transmission (*isnād*) for his sources al-Tha'labī sought to forestall any criticism which might be directed against his work, especially since he himself had found fault with some exegetes who failed to acknowledge the sources of their knowledge or supply chains of transmission. Through the marshaling of these titles, al-Tha'labī adopts, or wants to appear to adopt, a traditionalist hermeneutical approach

⁴ Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 18.

⁵ Ibid., 19.

to the Qur'ān. Thus al-Tha'labī declares that a junior scholar should learn quranic expertise from masters who are recognized authorities rather than depend upon innovation or personal opinion (*bida' wa-ahwā'*).⁶ For, according to him, without the guarantee of masters and recognized student-teacher reception of knowledge, i.e. *isnād*, anybody could say anything; or as he puts it in his terse Arabic: *wa-lawlā al-isnād la-qāla man shā mā shā*.⁷

Al-Tha'labī claims that he used about a hundred books (*kitāb*).⁸ This number can be true only if one considers the different versions of certain works as different titles; thus the title *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* of Muḥammad b. Ishāq is counted three times, since al-Tha'labī used three versions.⁹ If one counts the titles only and not their different versions there are then seventy-seven titles, still a considerable number by any standard.¹⁰

In addition to the books, al-Tha'labī has recourse to oral sources (mostly prophetic hadiths) which he cites frequently in the text; these he collected in the form of notes (*ta'līqāt*) and individual fascicles (*ajzā' mufaṣṣiqāt*) which he heard from about 300 scholars (*mashāyikh*).¹¹ This staggering number of authorities from whom he said he had transmitted these traditions should not be doubted. However, it cannot be verified until we possess a critical edition of the whole text. I was able to identify the most frequently cited of these authorities and will discuss their significance in this chapter.

Books

First let us turn our attention to the books used by al-Tha'labī. How are we to assess such a colossal number of sources and how are we to go about addressing their usefulness to modern Qur'ān scholarship? Before venturing into any answers, one needs to be aware of the manner in which al-Tha'labī uses and cites his sources.

The list of books presented by al-Tha'labī in his introduction not only enumerates the titles of the works he cites but also states how

⁶ Ibid., 16–17.

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Ibid., 67–68, 114.

¹⁰ See the index of titles prepared by Goldfeld, *ibid.*, 109–115.

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

many versions of a certain title were at his disposal. Thus, for *Tafsīr al-Kalbī*, al-Tha'labī uses three versions, while for *Tafsīr al-Dalīhāk* he uses four.¹² Each version has its own chain of transmitters through which it reached him and could only be distinguished from the other version through the authorities in the chain. The differentiation is thus based on the 'way' or *ṭarīq* through which a certain version reached scholars; for example the above mentioned *Tafsīr al-Kalbī*, is listed under three ways (*ṭuruq*): *ṭarīq Muḥammad b. Fuḍayl*, *ṭarīq Yūsuf b. Bilāl*, and *ṭarīq Hibbān*. However, unlike al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha'labī decided, in order to save space, to give the *isnād* of the versions and titles he used only once, that is in the introduction where he first mentions them. In the body of the commentary, al-Tha'labī omits all *isnād* for the quotations from these books and starts by the simple "al-Kalbī said" (*qāla al-Kalbī*), for example, with the result that we are unable to ascertain from which version of al-Kalbī's he is quoting.

This imposes a serious limitation on the modern scholar who wants to use al-Tha'labī's commentary to reconstruct early works.¹³ Thus although al-Tha'labī has used almost all the versions of Ibn 'Abbās' commentaries, it is unfeasible to recreate any individual version by simply collecting all the citations from Ibn 'Abbās in the text. If one attempts this, the result is the sum total of the traditions of Ibn 'Abbās' school and not an identifiable, distinct, early commentary. This, though, holds true only for the multi-version titles al-Tha'labī used. The other titles that came to al-Tha'labī in one version could likely be reconstructed, to the extent that he cites them.

The loss for scholarship from the simplification of *isnād* in these cases pales in comparison to what we gain from the unequivocal proof the list offers regarding the existence of early commentaries in the form of books. From the list we learn that in the 3rd and 4th centuries there were early *tafsīr* works in the form of books under the titles we encounter in the bibliographical dictionaries.¹⁴ This assertion should not be construed to mean that these works were also 'authentic', i.e. true representations of the original author's views.

¹² Ibid., 23–25, 29–31.

¹³ Sezgin's (*GIS*, V, 1: 49) assertion that we could reconstruct the original copies of these works should thus be regarded as doubtful.

¹⁴ Claude Gilliot was first of the opinion that al-Tha'labī's list was made up. He has since accepted its veracity. See his "Les débuts de l'exégèse coranique," *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 58 (1990): 82–100, esp. 88; id. "L'exégèse coranique: bilan partiel d'une décennie," *Studia Islamica* 85 (1997): 155–162.

These early works should be understood not as works authored by a particular scholar, Ibn 'Abbās for example, but as a work that originated with him and then was enlarged and modified by each of the students who transmitted the work, until eventually it reached a certain stage of growth after which the versions were stabilized, thus resulting in many distinct versions for the same title.¹⁵ My understanding of the nature of early commentaries draws upon Gregor Schoeler's work on the oral and written nature of early Islamic texts.¹⁶ Indeed, his analysis is the only one that can explain the existence of so many different versions of early Islamic works. Schoeler argues that in early Islamic times there was no real distinction between the transmitter of a work and its author. The transmitter who was also a student of the author usually added, removed, and adjusted the material he was transmitting. At a certain time (around the beginning of the 3rd century) these works reached a fixed form which was then transmitted as a closed corpus.¹⁷

Of the seventy-seven books al-Tha'labī cites, sixty are lost.¹⁸ The lost works can be divided into several categories:

1) Early commentaries that both al-Tha'labī and al-Ṭabarī used. There are 18 of these early commentaries; and one could with reasonable certainty say that al-Tha'labī's *al-Kashf* incorporates most of al-Ṭabarī's sources.¹⁹ This he could achieve by dropping the long *isnāds*, thus leaving more space for other commentators.

¹⁵ For literature on Ibn 'Abbās and the thorny issue of early commentaries see Andrew Rippin, "Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās and criteria for dating early *tafsīr* texts," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 38–83.

¹⁶ Gregor Schoeler has expounded his theory in four seminal articles on the topic. See "Die Frage der schriftlichen oder mündlichen Überlieferung der Wissenschaften im frühen Islam," *Der Islam* 62 (1985): 201–230; "Weiteres zur Frage der schriftlichen oder mündlichen Überlieferung der Wissenschaft im Islam," *Der Islam* 66 (1989): 38–67; "Mündliche Thora und Hadīṭ: Überlieferung, Schreibverbot, Redaktion," *Der Islam* 66 (1989): 213–251; "Schreiben und Veröffentlichen—Zu Verwendung und Funktion der Schrift in den ersten islamischen Jahrhunderten," *Der Islam* 69 (1992): 1–43. For a different view of the matter, see Michael Cook, "The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam," *Arabica* 44 (1997): 437–530.

¹⁷ Schoeler, "Die Frage", 216–217: "Nun gibt es eine Dichotomie Verfasser-Überlieferer in der frühen Zeit nur im Idealfall. Zumindest bis ins 9., 10. Jh. n. Chr. haben die meisten Überlieferer Stoff zu den ihnen tradierten Werken hinzugefügt, solchen weggelassen oder das Werk in irgend einer anderen Form bearbeitet. Seit dem 10. Jh. hat man allerdings offensichtlich immer mehr auch «erstarrte» Werke, Bücher mit mehr oder weniger fest umrissener Gestalt, tradiert."

¹⁸ See Appendix 3 for a list of the books lost.

¹⁹ The numbers of these works in the Appendix 3 are: 2, 3, 8, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 34, 36, 37, 39.

2) Early commentaries that predate al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and which he did not use. These include a Shī'ī commentary (no. 7 in the Appendix), a Mu'tazilite commentary (no. 12), two commentaries by "liars" (nos. 15, 33), as well as commentary authored by scholars from the eastern parts of the Islamic world (nos. 11, 17, 19, 23, 28, 32, 38, 40).

3) Contemporary commentaries and commentaries that originated after 310/923. These are extremely important since they record the development of the commentary as a genre in an era for which we have few surviving specimens.²⁰

4) Linguistic and rhetorical works, namely *kutub al-Gharīb* and *al-Ma'ānī*.²¹ Al-Tha'labī relied heavily on philological works in his commentary, and his work preserves some works that were never used later because of doctrinal scruples, like the work of Quṭrub (no. 54).

5) Works of variant quranic readings or *kutub al-qirā'āt*.²² Since most of the readings were later codified in the famous seven, ten, fourteen and *shawādh al-qirā'āt* collections, it is doubtful that al-Tha'labī's work has preserved readings we don't already have. Yet, a final statement on this matter awaits a careful study of the variant readings present in *al-Kashf* and a comparison with what we have from other sources.

6) The *Sīra* work of Ibn Ishāq, which could be classified into historical works.

The 17 works that are still extant can be distributed among these six categories with the exception of one work, namely that of al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021).²³ The Qur'ān commentary of al-Sulamī belongs to a different tradition of quranic exegesis, that of the mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān. Al-Tha'labī is one of the very few tradi-

²⁰ The numbers of these works are: 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 21, 24.

²¹ The numbers are: 43, 44, 45, 54, 55, 56, 59.

²² The numbers are: 41, 42, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52.

²³ On al-Sulamī see Gerhard Böwering, "The Qur'ān commentary of Al-Sulamī," in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, W.B. Hallaq and D.B. Little, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991): 41–56. See also Böwering's "From the Word of God to the Vision of God." In *Le voyage initiatique en terre d'Islam*, M.A. Amir-Moezzi, ed. 205–221. Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 1996. Al-Sulamī has a minor Qur'ān commentary in addition to his major one. See *The Minor Qur'ān Commentary of Abu 'Abd ar-Rahman Muhammad b. al-Husayn as-Sulamī (d. 412/1021)*, G. Böwering, ed. (Arabic text, introduction and notes). Beirut: Dar al-Machreq, 1995; 2nd ed. (Beirut 1997). The major commentary (commonly called the *Haqā'iq*) has been published as *Tafsīr al-Sulamī wa-huwa Haqā'iq al-tafsīr*. Sayyid 'Umrān, ed. 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Ilmiyya, 2000).

tional commentators who makes direct use of the mystical interpretative tradition.

Finally, if we analyze the *isnāds* (109 *isnāds* in all) that stand at the head of the books used by al-Tha'labī, we find that al-Tha'labī related these works from 44 different individuals (that is the last member of the chain before al-Tha'labī). Of the 109 *isnāds*, 62 are related by three individuals (or 63%). Two of these authorities are al-Tha'labī's teachers of exegesis whom we have already discussed: Ibn Ḥabīb and 'Abd Allāh b. Ḥāmid.²⁴ The third is Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Ḥamdawayh b. Na'im b. al-Ḥakam al-Ḍabbī al-Ṭihmānī, Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥakīm al-Naysābūrī, known also as Ibn al-Bayyī'. He was born in 321/933 and died in 405/1014. The fame of al-Ḥakīm rests on his activities as a traditionalist and as a historian. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the stature of al-Ḥakīm towered over the fourth century. He authored many works, the most important of which is a book on the science of hadith that set the standard for this discipline. His history of Nishapur, although now lost, was the basis for all the biographical works written on the men of eastern Iran. Despite the fame his scholarship brought him, he was not immune to criticism which centered on his Shī'ī inclinations. It is clear from the biographical material that the charge (from a Sunnī point of view) was irrefutable despite the dauntless attempt of al-Subkī to refute it. The main charge was that he allowed his Shī'ī proclivities to influence his scholarship, resulting in the incorporation of fabricated traditions into his collection, *al-Mustadrak*, which support the Shī'ī claim of 'Alī's right to the succession of Muḥammad. It is regrettable that there is neither a monograph nor an article on al-Ḥakīm in any Western language (apart from the small paragraph in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition). Al-Tha'labī relates many works through al-Ḥakīm and one might see the origin of the Shī'ī material related by al-Tha'labī in al-Ḥakīm's influence.²⁵

²⁴ See Chapter One, the section on the teachers of al-Tha'labī.

²⁵ On al-Ḥakīm, see *GAI*, Brockelmann, v. 2: 184–185; *GAS*, Sezgin, v. 1: 221–222; *al-Muntakhab min al-Siyāq*, 15–17; *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyah al-kubrā*, al-Subkī, v. 4: 155–171; *Ṭabīn kadhib al-muṣṭafī*, Ibn 'Asākir, 227–231; *Tārīkh Baghdād*, al-Baghdādī, v. 5: 473–474; *Tārīkh al-Islām*, al-Dhahabī, (401–420), 122–133; *Wafayāt al-'ayān*, Ibn Khallikān, v. 4: 280–281.

Oral Sources

By oral sources I do not mean material that was not written down—since by the 4th century, no traditional science was purely oral anymore. Instead I refer to material that was not in book form, primarily prophetic traditions that al-Thaʿlabī heard from teachers and traditionalists with whom he studied. As already mentioned, al-Thaʿlabī states that he collected this material from 300 *shuyūkh* (scholars) which he then gathered in fascicles and later incorporated in his commentary. Unlike what he did in the case of quotations from books, al-Thaʿlabī supplied the *isnād* for this material in the body of his commentary whenever there was a quotation. This was in keeping with his theory that scholars should supply the *isnād* to their knowledge; and since the material was culled from sources other than books, the *isnād* of which he had already supplied in the introduction, he felt obliged to give the *isnād* of each prophetic tradition that had its origin in oral transmission. It is these *isnāds* in the text proper of *al-Kashf* that many manuscripts omit.

The oral material can be roughly divided into two parts: prophetic traditions and non-prophetic material. The non-prophetic material includes diverse sources as the opinions of certain exegetes who did not leave full commentaries behind, poetry, explanations on certain passages of the Qurʾān from non-specialists, edifying stories and aphorisms, etc. The prophetic traditions are of two different kinds: known traditions that one could easily find in other collections, and those that only al-Thaʿlabī seems to have preserved. The latter are of great significance since they document the continued growth of the genre of prophetic logia even after the establishment of the science of hadith with its strict checks on new fabrications and the codification of the prophetic traditions in the major collections.

It is this oral material that constitutes one of our primary means of gauging the innovative spirit of al-Thaʿlabī. Most of the oral material used by al-Thaʿlabī was never part of the exegetical corpus and his use of this material marks its entry into mainstream quranic exegesis. It is this material that allows me to follow the influence of al-Thaʿlabī through the tradition, since any exegete who used this non-exegetical material copied it either from al-Thaʿlabī or from sources dependent on him.²⁶

²⁶ I have the occasion to return to this topic in detail in Chapter Seven.

Of the hundreds of authorities that al-Thaʿlabī transmitted from, six stand out as the most quoted, and among them, they have related an amount that constitutes about 60–80% of the oral traditions. Three of these we have already encountered: Ibn Ḥabīb, ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥāmid, and al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī. The other three are Ibn Fanjawayh, Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ʿAbdūs (henceforth Ibn ʿAbdūs) and Ibn al-Muqriʾ.

We know very little about Ibn ʿAbdūs (d. 396/1005); he is described as one of the literati (*adīb*), as well as a grammarian, and a jurist (*faqīh*).²⁷ Ibn al-Muqriʾ (381/991), or Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. ʿAlī b. ʿĀsim, on the other hand, was a renowned traditionalist, indeed the premier in the region of Isfahan. He traveled extensively to collect ḥadīth, a fact that is emphasized repeatedly by the biographers.²⁸ There is no doubt that through him, al-Thaʿlabī was able to tap different regional traditions and incorporate them in his Qurʾān commentary.

Ibn Fanjawayh, al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṣāliḥ b. Shuʿayb al-Thaqafī al-Dīnawarī (d. 414/1023), the last of our six, is undoubtedly the most frequently quoted of them all.²⁹ Such was the quantity of material that al-Thaʿlabī narrated from Ibn Fanjawayh in his Qurʾān commentary, that Ibn Fanjawayh's biographers mention this fact explicitly (*wa-qad ḥaddatha ʿanhu Abū Ishāq al-Thaʿlabī fī al-tafsīr*).³⁰ Ibn Fanjawayh was a famous traditionalist and was described as the author of many works which apparently did not survive.³¹ He did not escape censure, however, and was accused of reporting strange traditions (*manākīr*).³²

2. Structure

Al-Kashf is a verse-by-verse commentary on the entire Qurʾān. There is first a long introduction divided into four chapters (*bāb*). The first is the introduction proper, where al-Thaʿlabī explains why he wrote

²⁷ See al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, v. 17: 57–58; *Tārīkh al-Islām*, 381–400, p. 337; al-Qiftī, *Inbāḥ al-nuwāt*, v. 3: 56.

²⁸ See al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, 381–400, pp. 38–40, where there are extensive bibliographical references. See also Sezgin, *GAIS*, v. 1: 205.

²⁹ See al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, 401–420, pp. 343–344, with more bibliographical references there.

³⁰ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, v. 17: 384.

³¹ Only al-Fārisī mentions that he wrote books. See *al-Muntakhab*, 193–194.

³² Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, v. 17: 384.

the commentary, discusses the works of previous exegetes, and gives the titles and *isnāds* of the books he uses in his work. Then follows a chapter on "The merits of the Qur'ān, its people, and its recitation" (*bāb fī fadl al-Qur'ān wa-ahlihi wa-tilāwatihi*). The third chapter is entitled "On the merits of the quranic sciences and enjoining people to study it" (*bāb fī fadl 'ilm al-Qur'ān wa-al-targhīb fih*). The fourth chapter is entitled "On the meaning of *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*" (*bāb fī ma'nā al-tafsīr wa-al-ta'wīl*). These chapters contain al-Tha'labī's hermeneutical theory, his opinions regarding his profession, and his belief in the soteriological benefit of reading the Qur'ān.

After this introduction, al-Tha'labī starts with the first sura of the Qur'ān. In commenting on a sura, al-Tha'labī follows a well-defined plan: First, he mentions whether it is Meccan or Medinan, and gives the number of letters, words, and verses of each sura. This is usually given as a subtitle after the name of the sura. Then comes a section that is entitled "on the merits of this sura," where he quotes prophetic traditions about the merits acquired by reading the sura. Then commences the commentary proper, usually introducing a group of verses by "*qawluh ta'ālā*" (His statement, i.e. God).

Al-Tha'labī's commentary also includes a large number of excursions on various topics. The excursions occur on the first encounter with words that are of fundamental importance in Islamic dogma, e.g. belief (*īmān*), piety (*taqwā*), caliphate (*khalīfah*), sincerity (*ikhlas*). The dogmatic definitional excursus is one of the innovations that al-Tha'labī introduced to the genre which would later become fashionable among exegetes.

CHAPTER FOUR

AL-THA'LABĪ'S THEORETICAL HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

A. *The Introduction of al-Kashf*

In our attempt to study al-Tha'labī's hermeneutics, one encounters a dissonance between his declarative statements about the art of exegesis, as expressed in the introduction to his commentary, and his actual practice in the body of his work. The reason to this dissonance lies in the inescapability of the Islamic exegetical tradition. Original and innovative as his works are, al-Tha'labī was confined by the heavy weight of the previous exegetical corpus which all exegetes were bound to revere and follow. Thus, the aims announced in the introduction, ambitious and audacious though they are, are tempered by the already-established course of the tradition. The radical changes al-Tha'labī introduces have a precarious coexistence, even in his own work, with the old ways of doing interpretation. This is true of al-Tha'labī's influence as well; although many of his innovations and views seeped into the craft of exegesis, many others were doggedly exorcised or softened. Thus a full understanding of the exegetical methods of al-Tha'labī can only be gained by keeping in mind the tension between his theory and his practice. Having stated this, it should be made clear that al-Tha'labī did indeed achieve what he set out to do, a reshaping of the tradition of quranic exegesis. What becomes interesting to us is the way he accomplished his aims: he effected a transformation that worked with the tradition, not against it. It is not an immediate realization that what he produced was different from the tradition, and yet it was also the same. Our eyes have to learn to notice the detail that, at first glance, looks familiar. In this chapter the introduction of *al-Kashf* will be analyzed and studied, while an analysis of al-Tha'labī's exegetical approach in practice will be reserved for Chapters Five and Six.

Written almost a century after al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/922) monumental introduction to his commentary, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, al-Tha'labī's introduction shows remarkable independence and an innovative spirit

that was never seen before.¹ It is nothing short of a sweeping review of four centuries of scholarly output on the study of the Qur'ān. It would not be an exaggeration to state that almost all the important early works in quranic exegesis are discussed in this introduction. But the most interesting element of the introduction is the time of its appearance in the field of quranic exegesis. It comes on the cusp of the maturation of quranic studies and as a culmination of four centuries of engagement with the Qur'ān.²

After the customary prayers and benedictions which open any Islamic work, al-Tha'labī informs us that he devoted his life to the study of the science of quranic exegesis. He began these studies from a tender age, and by the time he reached maturity (*balaghtu al-ashudd*) he was an accomplished scholar. He then describes his educational journey in more detail:

... and I [al-Tha'labī] frequented the various kinds of scholars, and made a tremendous effort to learn from this science [Quranic exegesis] which is the foundation of religion, and the head of all Islamic sciences (*ulūm al-shar'iyah*); I studied day and night, evening and morning, with relentless determination, until God bestowed on me a knowledge that enabled me to distinguish doctrinally sound [interpretations] from devious ones, mediocre from outstanding, valid from invalid, new from old, heretical from established (*summah*), and cogently argued [interpretations] from poorly supported ones.³

The important statement in this paragraph is al-Tha'labī's assertion that the science of Qur'ān interpretation is the foundation of religion (*hūwa li-al-dīn al-asās*) and the queen (literally head) of the Islamic

¹ Articles that tackle the huge number of introductions to Qur'ān commentaries are few. See O. Loth, "Tabarī's Korankommentar," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 35 (1881): 588–628, in which he discusses the introduction on pages 588–599; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Quranic Hermeneutics: The views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, Andrew Rippin, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 46–62; Id., "Ibn al-Jawzī's Exegetical Propaganda: Introduction and Translation," *Alif* 8 (1988): 101–113; Manfred Götz, "Māturīdī und sein Kitāb *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*," *Der Islam* 41 (1965): 27–70; Claude Gilliot has a translation into French of parts of al-Ṭabarī's introduction; see his *Exégèse, langue, et théologie en Islam* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1990), 73 ff. For a study of the preface in Arabic literature in general, see the dissertation of Peter Freimark, *Das Vorwort als literarische Form in der arabischen Literatur* (Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität, 1967).

² I have relied on Goldfeld's edition for this chapter. In certain instances I opt for a reading from the al-Mahmūdīyah copy instead. Justifications for these emendations are offered in the appropriate places.

³ Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 16.

sciences (*wa-li-al-'ulūm al-shar'iyah al-ra's*). This assertion has to be understood in the larger picture of the intellectual development in fifth/eleventh century medieval Islam. Islamic sciences were not only being systematized, but schools were being built and programs of study devised. In this atmosphere there was a competition among the different branches of sciences for dominance, and al-Tha'labī is proposing quranic exegesis as the undisputed queen of this realm.⁴

Moreover, in this paragraph al-Tha'labī is quick to point out that the knowledge he acquired as a student of exegesis has enabled him to become an arbitrator in the field. The long nights, the perseverance, the visits to different scholars, and finally, the grace of God are all proof that he can issue judgments on the quality of scholarship in the field. He thus, from the onset, establishes his authority as an exegete who can guide the believer in a sea of conflicting interpretations.

But what is the function of quranic exegesis? What is the aim of this endeavor? Apparently, the Qur'ān on its own, according to al-Tha'labī, is insufficient for attaining salvation, and believers left on their own with this book will not find their way to God. Al-Tha'labī reminds the reader that "God cannot be appeased by [the believers] reading the letters of the Qur'ān without keeping its injunctions, or uttering its words without executing its orders, nor with reading and reciting it without contemplating the verses and reflecting on its statements. [God will not be happy] unless we learn the Qur'ān's truths (*ḥaqā'iqihī*) and meanings (*ma'ānīhī*) and understand its subtleties (*daqā'iqihī*) and [grammatical] construction (*mabānīhī*)."⁵ The Qur'ān is thus in need of explanation in order for the Muslims to benefit from it.

⁴ On knowledge and social control in medieval Islam, see Michael Carter, "Language control as people control in Medieval Islam: The aims of Grammarians in their cultural context," *Abhāth* 31 (1983): 65–84; on hierarchy of knowledge, see Paul Heck, "The Hierarchy of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization," *Arabica* 49 (2002): 27–54; Wolfhart Heinrichs, "The Classification of the Sciences and the Consolidation of Philology in Classical Islam," in *Centres of Learning: Learning and Location in Pre-Modern Europe and the Near East*, Jan Willem Drijvers and Alasdair MacDonald, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995): 119–139. Al-Wāḥidī, the student of al-Tha'labī, will make the point of the superiority of exegesis more bluntly. In the introduction to his *al-Wasīṭ*, al-Wāḥidī argues that since the Qur'ān is the preeminent source of Islamic sciences, exegesis, which is the science that deals with the Qur'ān, is the most noble of all the sciences (*ashraf al-'ulūm*), see his *al-Wasīṭ*, 'Adil Ahmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd et al., ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1994), v. 1: 47.

⁵ Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 15, my emphasis. Notice the discrepancy between this statement and his statements in the pamphlet *Slain by the Qur'ān*. To each audience al-Tha'labī spoke differently.

Fortunately, God took care to provide for the Muslims the experts (*fa-qayyad lahu rijālan*) who write books on the Qur'ān (*ṣannafū fihī al-muṣannaṣāt*) and gather the disparate sciences that are found in it (*wa-jama'ū 'ulūmahū al-mutaṣarrifāt*). It is thus clear that between the Qur'ān and the believer stands the exegete as the bearer of the word of God, having made it simple and systematic. But although a science, quranic exegesis is first and foremost a salvational tool, if not the only tool, for redemption. In this respect exegesis becomes an act of devotion, and the exercise of al-Tha'labī in interpreting the Qur'ān is an exercise in helping fellow believers become better Muslims. Lest we have missed the point, al-Tha'labī draws an analogy between publishing scholarly works for the benefit of fellow believers to the act of giving alms tax to the poor.⁶ One nourishes the soul, the other the body.

By claiming that quranic exegesis is the foundation of the Islamic sciences and that Muslims need quranic exegesis to become better Muslims, al-Tha'labī was attempting to make central the position of Qur'ān commentators. Exegetes in this light are pivotal to the intellectual and religious lives of the Muslims, a bold claim that reflects the precarious situation this field must have been in, since law (*fiqh*) as a discipline was winning the day in medieval Islam.

Furthermore, the implications of viewing exegesis primarily as a devotional tool are profound. Indeed, this view of exegesis alters the very meaning of the word 'exegesis', which has to be redefined carefully. Exegesis in this light is not concerned with seeking one meaning, the 'true' meaning of a verse. In other words, exegesis as understood by al-Tha'labī is not only philological (and hence capable of generating one meaning), it is first and foremost doctrinal. Philological tools are no doubt the foundation of the endeavor but they are not the edifice. Rather, making religious sense of the Qur'ān, and peering into God's mind are the aims of al-Tha'labī. The direct implication of such a position is an acceptance of the multiplicity of meanings for a given verse. We thus see a convergence between the encyclopedic spirit that is *ijmā'*-based (consensus-based) and the salvific nature of *tafsīr*. Both are capable of accepting a polyvalent text. Yet, the process of generating meanings is not at all haphazard; rather, it is controlled by three guidelines: philology, doctrine, and tradition.

⁶ *fa-inna shukr al-'ilm nashruhu wa-zakātah infāquhu*, (thanksgiving for knowledge consists in spreading it, and giving the tithe on knowledge is to offer it for people), *ibid.*, 18-19.

In the opening page of his introduction al-Tha'labī conveys three points to his reader. The first is that quranic exegesis is the most important of the Islamic sciences. The second that it is a prerequisite for salvation, and the third is that he, as an exegete, is well versed in this art and competent enough to issue judgments on the state of the field. Judge he does.

According to al-Tha'labī, authors of Qur'ān commentaries can be divided into six categories or groups (*firqah*), none of which could be said to have carried out their duties properly. The people of heresy and innovation (*aḥl al-bida' wa-al-ahwā'*) constitute the first group. Al-Tha'labī gives the name of four exegetes as examples of scholars who belong to this group; significantly all are Mu'tazilī.⁷ He also informs us that he was ordered not to associate with them, and not to follow their example either in deed or in word. He is frank as to the reason: knowledge is religion (*wa-al-'ilm dīn*) and one should be careful from whence one takes his religion. By singling out the Mu'tazilī from among the many Muslim sects, al-Tha'labī leaves no doubt that he belongs to one of the anti-Mu'tazilī camps of the Sunnī tradition, the Shāfi'ī tradition.

The second group, though of sound religion, were not professional exegetes but mere dabblers in this art (*lam yakun al-tafsīr ḥirfatahum wa-lā 'ilm al-ta'wīl ṣan'atahum*). They were jurists who mistook their knowledge in jurisprudence for knowledge of the Qur'ān. Their inexperience and naiveté led them to collect exegetical material of varying quality, thus mixing the doctrinally sound with the heretical. Jurists, al-Tha'labī argues, should restrict themselves to their profession, for does not specialization dictate professionalism (*li-kulli 'ilmīn rijāl*)?⁸ These two groups are dubious, in al-Tha'labī's view, because of the content of their commentaries, and not for any methodological deficiency.

The four remaining groups are singled out for methodological errors in the art of exegesis and not for doctrinal deviations. The third group are censured by al-Tha'labī because their works were mere collections of transmitted and related material (*riwāyah* and *naql*) and void of any exercise of judgment or criticism (*dirāyah* and *naqd*). They are, al-Tha'labī says, like a druggist, who despite his extensive

⁷ They are: Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī (d. 319/931), Abū 'Alī al-Jubhā'ī (d. 303/915), Muḥammad b. Baḥr al-Iṣfahānī (d. 322/933), and 'Alī b. 'Isā al-Rummānī (d. 384/994), see Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, p. 16 notes 1-4 for references.

⁸ Emend Goldfeld reading where he has instead *'ilm*, *'amal*. See *al-Kāshf*, M98, fol. 2(a).

knowledge of medications, is in need of a professional doctor to attend to his own ailments. We see here al-Tha'labī once again attempting to demarcate a role for the exegetes of his time. Merely transmitting exegetical knowledge does not qualify one for the rank of an exegete. Exegesis is a science whose tools are *dirāyah* (understanding, judgment) and *naqd* (criticism, assessment).

The fourth group, on the other hand, neglected to attribute their knowledge by dropping the use of *isnād* (chain of transmission), and went about collecting knowledge from books and pamphlets, oblivious to the fact that knowledge should be taken from scholars directly and not just from books.⁹ They were self-schooled with neither a guide nor a mentor to show them the way. Their scholarship was thus marred by whimsical personal opinions (*hawās al-khawāṭir*), and their books were a hodgepodge of good and bad material (*al-ghathth wal-samīn, al-wāhī wa-al-mafīn*). They are not to be counted among the scholars, declares al-Tha'labī (*laysū fī 'idād al-'ulamā'*). He then reminds the reader that knowledge is a legacy that junior scholars acquire from senior ones. And surely with the absence of the guarantee of *isnād*, anybody can claim anything.

Though most adept in their interpretive skills, the fifth group have done a disservice to the field through the excesses of their style. Their books were extravagantly voluminous, plagued by repetitions, and redundancy in the citation of *isnāds*. Furthermore, their books were stuffed (*hashawhā*) with unnecessary material which, combined with the length of these works, deterred the interested reader. Al-Ṭabarī, among others, belongs to this group. By taking al-Ṭabarī to task, al-Tha'labī is showing not only bravado but also a keen perception of the nature of the Islamic sciences. By the fifth century *isnāds* have become so long that doing what al-Ṭabarī did a century earlier, i.e. citing full *isnāds* for every tiny bit of information, would have resulted in a yet larger work with little more substantial content. *Isnād*, al-Tha'labī believes, though the foundational base of Islamic science, should not become an impediment for the students and the readers. If one is to follow the example of al-Ṭabarī and mention the *isnāds* of every piece of information, then books would be impossible to be read, riddled as they would be with name after name, thus disrupting the flow of any argument or story. Al-Tha'labī's

⁹ Al-Jāhiz (d. 255/869) earlier complained about the *suhufi* scholars, those self-taught dilettantes who never sat at the feet of another scholar to acquire knowledge.

solution to this problem was ingenious; he simply mentioned the *isnāds* once at the beginning of his book and thus freed the text from repetitions. Yet by mentioning them in the introduction, he guaranteed the soundness of the traditions contained in his work. Al-Tha'labī finishes his assessment of this group of commentators by adducing the adage of the law of diminishing returns: knowledge presented in a muddled, crowded manner confuses the intellect (*wa-zdihām al-'ulūm maḍallatun lil-fuhūm*).¹⁰

In the sixth and final group al-Tha'labī places the earliest Islamic commentators (*mashāyikh al-salaf*) such as Mujāhid (d. 104/722), Muqātil (d. 150/767), al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), and al-Suddī (d. 128/745). Although he praises them highly for their pioneering efforts, al-Tha'labī finds fault with their approach, which was strictly explanatory (or explicatory). These exegetes disregarded the legal aspects of the Qur'ān. Moreover, their commentaries neither dealt with the obscurities and problematic passages in the Qur'ān nor contained any refutations of the views of heretical sects.¹¹

It is important here to emphasize the nature of the criteria which al-Tha'labī uses to criticize his predecessors. There were first the doctrinal and methodological aspects of their work which he found wanting. He also criticized the lack of understanding on the part of some authors of what makes for a successful book. The length and style of a commentary are as important as the content. By choosing al-Ṭabarī, the most illustrious exegete of this era, as an example of a good scholar who is a bad writer, al-Tha'labī leaves no doubt as to the importance of the organization of an exegetical work. This is consistent with his view that exegesis is first and foremost a tool for the believers to attain salvation. A Qur'ān commentary that is impossible to read is useless no matter how insightful its content. Exegesis should be accessible to the reader.

Having shown the deficiencies of the preceding exegetes, al-Tha'labī then concludes his classification of the Qur'ān commentators by enumerating the reasons that prompted him to write his work. The first is that he could not find a book in the field that was comprehensive (*jāmi'*), organized (*muhadhdhab*), or reliable (*yutamad 'alayhi*). The second is that al-Tha'labī was worried that people of his generation were turning their backs on exegesis (*raghbat*

¹⁰ Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 18.

¹¹ Ibid.

al-nās 'an hādhā al-'ilm zāhirah) and were unwilling to exert themselves to learn this art (*wa-himamahum 'an al-baḥth qāṣirah*). Finally, al-Tha'labī states that he was asked by colleagues and notables to write a Qur'ān commentary, a plea that he felt obliged to answer.

Al-Tha'labī thus resolved to write a commentary that would be "comprehensive, well organized, unblemished (*mukhallas*),¹² intelligible (*maṣhūm*), and in good style (*manzūm*)."¹³ This work, he declares, will be based on almost a hundred previous works in addition to oral material collected from about three hundred scholars. Lest the reader think that such a large number of sources will eventually result in an unwieldy work, al-Tha'labī reiterates his resolution that the work will be well structured and organized, and promises that it will be insightful as well as accessible.¹⁴

Al-Tha'labī finishes his reflections on what constitutes a good book by spelling out what one should expect from any new work in an already established field in order for it to be worth the readers' trouble. I have already cited this part of the introduction in Chapter Three.

The Fourteen Aspects of al-Tha'labī's Hermeneutics

Having demonstrated the deficiencies of his predecessors by showing the inadequacy of their works, and having explained the organizational principles that will guide his production, al-Tha'labī moves on to elaborate his hermeneutical approach. In the introduction he speaks of fourteen aspects or ways (*naḥw*) of approaching the material in his book (*kharrajt fīh al-kalām*). The terminology he uses is sometimes difficult to comprehend and its connotation is not entirely clear since he decided not to adduce these terms in the body of the commentary (*adrajtuhā fī al-kitāb min dūn dhikr al-abwāb*).¹⁵ Thus we are left with a terminology that is not, at least in any self-evident way, directly connected to its application in the text.

I have followed two guidelines in order better to understand these aspects or ways and determine what al-Tha'labī meant by them.

¹² Read *mukhallas* as in M98 fol. 2(b) instead of *mulakḥḥas* (summarized) as in Goldfeld edition, 19. The reading *kh-l-s* is not only more difficult (*lectio difficilior*) but makes better sense. Al-Tha'labī mentions twice that comprehensiveness is a main criteria for a good Qur'ān commentary and a comprehensive work is not usually a summary!

¹³ Goldfeld, *Qur'anic Commentary*, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The first is to investigate the terminology in the light of its previous usage in quranic exegesis. The second is to connect the terminology to the practice of al-Tha'labī in his commentary. Despite these efforts some terms have defied a clear explanation. The situation is made all the more difficult by the absence of a comprehensive systematic study of exegetical terms in early quranic exegesis. Moreover, many of the terms used by al-Tha'labī are unique and in certain instances there are few if any antecedents of such usage in the field of exegesis.¹⁶

Although al-Tha'labī speaks about fourteen aspects, the aspects come in rhymed pairs (except for the last), so in fact we have 27 terms (thirteen doublets and one pendant). The first aspect is what he calls "preliminaries and introductions (or premises)" (*basā'it* and *muqaddimāt*). By this we should understand he means the whole introduction to his commentary since there are no introductions as such preceding any sections in the body of the work. Nor is it al-Tha'labī's practice to start the interpretation of individual verses with any preliminaries. And it would be difficult to see these words as referring to the merit-of-sura sections that open every sura, especially since he refers to these sections later in the thirteenth aspect he enumerates.

The second aspect is "numbering and place of revelation" (*adad* and *tanzīlāt*). The term 'numbering' refers to the information supplied at the beginning of each sura: the number of letters, words, and verses of each sura; while the second term refers to the place a sura was revealed (Mecca or Medina). This obsession with numbers and counting which al-Tha'labī exhibits is unusual in medieval Qur'ān exegesis and he seems to share this proclivity with the Karrāmī tradition.¹⁷ This is the first instance where we see a possible connection between a Karrāmī practice and al-Tha'labī's approach.¹⁸

The third aspect deals with the reasons behind revealing certain verses (*nuzūlāt*, sending down) and the stories the revelations refer to

¹⁶ On a possible Karrāmī antecedent see below in this chapter.

¹⁷ See chapter ten in the anonymous Karrāmī text *Muqaddimat kitāb al-mabānī* published by Arthur Jeffery in *Muqaddimatāt fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Cairo, 1972), 235-250. For a strong argument that this anonymous introduction is a Karrāmī text, see Aron Zysow, "Two Unrecognized Karrāmī Texts," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108 (1988): 577-587. See also the recent article by Claude Gilliot, "Les sciences coraniques chez les Karrāmites du Khorasan: Le Livre des Fondations," *Journal Asiatique* 288 (2000): 18-81.

¹⁸ Interestingly, this approach was not subsequently popular, but it has witnessed a revival in modern times with the advent of the computer and investigations into the assumed numerical wonders of the Qur'ān.

(*qisas*, stories). The more common term for the reasons for revelation of a certain verse or sura is of course "*asbāb al-nuzūl*", or reasons for revelation;¹⁹ al-Tha'labī avoided this term to attain a consistent rhyme, since he strove to render all the fourteen aspects in rhymed prose (*saj'*). Al-Tha'labī's devotion to recounting the stories in the Qur'ān is well known. His most famous work, *Tales of the Prophets*, which was to become the standard work on tales of the Qur'ān, is culled from his Qur'ān commentary.

The fourth aspect focuses on homonyms (*wujūh*, facets) and variant quranic readings (*qirā'āt*, readings).²⁰ Although the lexicographic meaning of the fifth aspect is clear, its connotation is obscure. The terms are *'ilal* (reasons, causes) and *ihṭijājāt* (arguments, reasons). It is not clear what sort of arguments and reasons al-Tha'labī is referring to; are they legal, linguistic, historical, or all sorts of arguments? It is rather impossible to decide one way or the other.

The sixth and seventh aspects address the issue of Arabic language in exegesis. The sixth aspect concerns itself with the provenance of certain quranic vocabulary, whether of Arabic or foreign origin (*al-ʿarabīyah* and *lughāt*), while the seventh deals with grammar, case endings, and morphology (*irāb* and *muwāzanāt*).²¹

The eighth aspect deals with interpretation (*tafsīr*) and exegesis (*ta'wīl*). Since these two terms are fully explained by al-Tha'labī in a separate chapter of his introduction, I will discuss his understanding of the two terms when I analyze his chapter below.

The ninth and tenth aspects deal with meanings (*maʿānī*), connotations (*jihāt*), obscurities (*ghawāmiḍ*) and problematic passages (*mushkilāt*). Like number five, the exact meaning of these terms eludes us since we are unable to give any examples as to what exactly they refer to.

Number eleven is concerned with legal rules (*ahkām*) and legal stipulations (*fiqhīyāt*). This is reflected in the body of the commentary where al-Tha'labī expounds at length on the legal aspects of the Qur'ān; al-Tha'labī's legal point of view is always that of the Shifī'i school of law.

¹⁹ On *asbāb al-nuzūl*, see Andrew Rippin, "The Function of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* in Qur'ānic Exegesis," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51 (1988): 1-20.

²⁰ On *wujūh*, see John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 208-211; Muhammad Abdus Sattar, "Wujūh al-Qur'ān: A Branch of Tafsīr Literature," *Islamic Studies* 17 (1978): 137-152.

²¹ I take *muwāzanāt* to refer to *sarf* (morphology) based on the root *w-z-n* that plays a central role in this science.

Al-Tha'labī's twelfth aspect deals with the mystical (*ishārāt*) and wisdom (*ḥikam*) dimensions of the Qur'ān.²² Al-Tha'labī studied the mystical Qur'ān commentary of al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) with the author himself and later incorporated much of its material into his own work. Moreover, al-Tha'labī has collected mystical interpretations that were independent of al-Sulamī's tradition. These are of paramount importance to the study and development of this particular genre of quranic exegesis.

The thirteenth aspect deals with the merits of the Qur'ān (*faḍā'il*) and its miraculous benefits (*karāmāt*). Before commenting on a given sura, al-Tha'labī always provides the prophetic traditions that enumerate the benefits incurred when one reads it. This technique is present throughout the work. What al-Tha'labī means by *karāmāt* (miraculous benefits) of the Qur'ān, however is not clear. Is he referring to its healing powers?

The fourteenth and the final aspect deals with miscellaneous reports about the Qur'ān (*al-akhbār al-mutaʿalliqāt*). The import of this aspect is likewise not clear. It appears that these miscellaneous reports are not central to the understanding of the Qur'ān, yet were adduced for a more rounded appreciation of the word of God.

The Background of the Fourteen Aspects

Al-Tha'labī's fourteen aspects are not only unusual in the history of Qur'ān interpretation, but seem to crop up without any apparent antecedents in the literature. Yet the large number of aspects, their pairing, and their unusual vocabulary do indicate al-Tha'labī's awareness of the history of development that preceded his use of some of them. Thanks to the pioneering work of Joseph van Ess, we are able to locate a possible antecedent for al-Tha'labī's terminology and approach. In his *Ungenützte Texte zur Karrāmīya: Eine Materialsammlung*, van Ess discusses the manuscript Oriental 8049 of the British Museum and ascertains that the work is of Karrāmī origin.²³ The work, a Qur'ān commentary stemming from the early fifth/eleventh century

²² On *ishārāt* as the technical term for mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān see Gerhard Böwering, "The Qur'ān Commentary of Al-Sulamī," in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, W.B. Hallaq and D.P. Little, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 50-51. Id., "Sufi Hermeneutics in Medieval Islam," *Revue des études Islamiques* 57 (1989), 261.

²³ (Heidelberg, 1980), 41-55.

and thus contemporaneous with al-Tha'labī, speaks of seven aspects of approaching the interpretation of a verse. Five of the seven aspects come in pairs, and their language is reminiscent of the aspects of al-Tha'labī.²⁴ Indeed, four of the pairs resemble pairs from al-Tha'labī, both in content and meaning.²⁵ This resemblance could not possibly be a coincidence, especially since an authority like Van Ess declares the terminology used in Oriental 8049 to be unusual (*ungewöhnliche Terminologie*) and thus the possibility of both al-Tha'labī and Oriental 8049 converging by accident upon the same approach and terminology is highly unlikely. If we couple this with the fact that al-Tha'labī's teacher in exegesis, Ibn Ḥabīb, was a Karrāmī, and that al-Tha'labī, was, like the Karrāmīs, interested in numerical aspects of the Qur'ān (how many verses in a certain sura and how many letters), then it may well be the case that al-Tha'labī was using and refining a method of interpretation that was current among the Karrāmī school in Khurasan. If this is so, then we have in the commentary of al-Tha'labī one of the few examples of a mainstream Sunni work that is heavily influenced by the Karrāmī school.²⁶

Another resemblance between Oriental 8049 and al-Tha'labī is the similar method of the use of the *isnād*. Like al-Tha'labī's method in his commentary, Oriental 8049 seems to follow a similar line in

²⁴ Ibid., 42: "Der Aufbau der einzelnen Abschnitte ist dabei immer gleich. Jeder Vers wird unter sechs verschiedenen Gesichtspunkten abgehandelt, die mit einer z. T. ungewöhnlichen Terminologie bezeichnet werden: 1) al-bisāt, Darlegung, d. h. textimmanente Exegese mit Parallelen aus dem Koran (allerdings gelegentlich auch mit außerkoranischen Belegen), 2) al-akhbār wal-hikāyat, inhaltlich verwendete Anekdoten und Aussprüche berühmter Autoritäten, 3) al-wuḡūh wan-naẓā'ir, über die verschiedenen Bedeutungen der in dem Vers benutzten Schlüsselwörter, 4) an-nukat wal-iṣārāt, 5) al-ḥaqā'iq wal-aḥkām, über den paränetischen (zum Weinen bringenden) Wert des Verses, mit Aussprüchen von Asketen und gelegentlich auch Versen." It is interesting to note that Van Ess did not gloss number four in the list; he must have seen it as self-evident that by *ishārāt* the author referred to mystical interpretations of the Qur'ān.

²⁵ No. 2 in Or. 8049 *al-akhbār wa-al-hikāyat* resembles no. 14 in al-Tha'labī's list (*al-akhbār al-mufalliḡāt*); no. 3 in Or. 8049 *al-wuḡūh wa-al-naẓā'ir* resembles no. 4 in al-Tha'labī's list (*al-wuḡūh wa-al-qirā'āt*); no. 4 *al-nukat wa-al-ishārāt* resembles no. 12 (*al-ḥikam wa-al-ishārāt*); no. 5 *al-ḥaqā'iq wa-al-aḥkām* resembles no. 11 (*al-aḥkām wa-al-fiqhiyat*).

²⁶ It is very interesting to note here that the first term in both al-Tha'labī's list and Or. 8049 is derived from the same root: *b-s-ṭ*. While the *bisāt* of Or. 8049 is clearly a borrowing from the Jewish exegetical tradition (*peshat*), al-Tha'labī's *basā'it* is more in keeping with the meaning of the word inside the Arabo-Islamic tradition. Still the use of the same root at the beginning of both lists is a very strong indication of their kinship. I should like to thank here Professor Shlomo Nach for his help in directing me to the relevant literature on *peshat*.

not adducing *isnāds* when quoting books, but bringing the full *isnād* when relating oral material.²⁷ Thus al-Tha'labī's method of citation might have been a method developed by the Karrāmī school of exegesis and adopted by him in his work.²⁸

On the Qur'ān and its People

Al-Tha'labī devotes two chapters in the introduction to extolling the virtues of the Qur'ān, the scholars who study it, and the preeminence of quranic studies. In these two chapters he revisits the two themes he touched upon in the opening pages of his introduction: that the Qur'ān is the source of salvation (*najāt*) for the Muslims and that the caretakers of the Qur'ān, scholars like al-Tha'labī, are crucial to the well-being of the Muslim nation.

In the first chapter, entitled "On the excellence of the Qur'ān, of its people and of its recitation," al-Tha'labī cites eleven prophetic traditions on these themes.²⁹ The first five speak of the preeminent position of the Qur'ān in God's scheme of creation and in the life of Muslims. The Qur'ān is declared to be above any other speech as God is above all his creatures.³⁰ It is a wealth (*ghinā*) like no other wealth, it is God's banquet (*ma'dubah*) for the believers, and finally it is God's firm rope (*ḥabl Allāh al-matīn*). But most importantly the Qur'ān is better than anything else aside from God and is also the gateway to God's grace, for whoever honors it honors God and whoever disrespects it disrespects God.³¹

The sixth tradition, the tradition that divides the chapter into two equal parts, equates the Qur'ān with prophecy. Thus if a Muslim reads one third of the Qur'ān he will be given one third of prophecy, and if one reads the entire Qur'ān he will be given all of prophecy (*man qara' al-qur'ān kullahu ūtiyā al-nubuwwata kullahā*). Through reading the Qur'ān, a Muslim, al-Tha'labī wants to say, is able to approach

²⁷ Van Ess, *Ungenützte*, 43.

²⁸ Granted that there seems to be a convergence among scholars of different fields in using this method of *isnād* citation. The most notable example is al-Azharī's *Tahdhīb al-lughah*. The similarities between the introduction of *al-Kashf* and this work are remarkable. One cannot rule out that al-Tha'labī modeled his introduction on that of his compatriot al-Azharī.

²⁹ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M98, fol. 15 (a): *Bāb fī faḍl al-Qur'ān wa-aḥlihi wa-tilāwatih*.

³⁰ Ibid., *faḍl al-qur'ān 'alā ṣā'ir al-kalām ka-faḍl Allāh 'azz wa-jall 'alā ṣā'ir khalqih*.

³¹ Ibid., fol. 15 (b): *al-Qur'ān afdal kull shay'in dūn Allāh fa-man waqqara al-Qur'ān fa-qad waqqara Allāh wa-man lam yuwaqqir al-Qur'ān fa-qad istakhaḥa bi-ḥurmat Allāh*.

the religious rank of Muhammad. In this light, the reading of the Qur'ān becomes one of the most important acts of devotion in which a Muslim can engage. If we keep in mind that the recitation of the Qur'ān does not even figure in the official ritual practice of Islam, apart from the recitation of the first chapter (*al-Fāṭihah*), we realize how radical this statement is.

Traditions seven to ten speak about the glory that awaits the Muslims who study the Qur'ān and recite it. Although any Muslim could be the referent in these traditions, it soon becomes apparent that only quranic specialists are really meant. They are referred to as 'the carriers of the Qur'ān' (*hamalat al-Qur'ān*) meaning those who ensure that the Qur'ān is transmitted from generation to generation.³² These scholars are to be feared, for if one is to take them as enemies one runs the danger of being the enemy of God, but on the other hand, being their friend is also a guarantee that God will be your friend. Al-Tha'labī cites a tradition that states that these scholars should be kept by the government itself through regular payments, and since this is not happening God will make sure to recompense them for their loss in the coming world.

The chapter is concluded by a tradition that has one of the companions asking Muhammad for a path to salvation. Muhammad answers: "if you want to live happily, die a martyr's death,³³ attain salvation on Judgment Day, and have shade during the sunny Day of Judgment,³⁴ and guidance on the day of loss, then study the Qur'ān, for it is the speech of God. It is a guardian against Satan, and the weight that will tilt the balance to your advantage when deeds are measured."³⁵ The term used for studying of the Qur'ān is "*dars*". Clearly, this prophetic tradition is speaking about professional scholars, or exegetes. Jurists have a lot to worry about now that the rank of an exegete is prophetically sanctioned.

³² Ibid., fol. 16(a).

³³ Al-Tha'labī seems to be determined to appropriate the rank of martyrdom to the realm of Qur'ān and its readers. See my discussion of his small treatise *Slain by the Qur'ān* in Chapter Two of this book.

³⁴ The reference here is to the blazing sun that will oppress humanity on Judgment Day; the sun apparently will be literally hanging over the heads of the gathered humanity. Those who are good enough will be spared the heat by the shade of clouds.

³⁵ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M98, fol. 17(a).

The second chapter, entitled "On the merits of the Science of Qur'ān and on enjoining people to undertake it," emphasizes the need for the study of the interpretation of the Qur'ān.³⁶ The traditions quoted by al-Tha'labī show that apparently the prophet taught the Muslims not only the scripture but also its interpretation. Muhammad used to teach his companions ten verses at a time, then explained them before proceeding to teach the next ten, and thus the companions learned the Qur'ān and its sciences (*fa-ta'allamū al-Qur'ān wa-al-'ilm jamī'an*). It is interesting that al-Tha'labī calls the interpretation of the Qur'ān 'Science' with a definite article (*al-'ilm*). If knowledge is to be sought, quranic knowledge is *the knowledge* in Islam. Moreover, Ibn 'Abbās is quoted as saying that the reader of the Qur'ān who does not know its interpretation is like a Bedouin (*al-a'rābī*), who though able to read it, is unable to understand it.³⁷ Surely, it did not escape the educated reader that an *a'rābī*, a Bedouin, is the most unholy of believers, as the Qur'ān never tires of saying. They are Muslims all-right, but faith is not in their hearts (Qur'ān, 49:14). It is not inconceivable that this tradition is an indirect attack on the philologists who, though superb scholars in Arabic language and its ways, are not qualified to become experts on the Qur'ān.

Al-Tha'labī then relates another anecdote about the famous early Sufi and ascetic al-Fuḍayl b. 'Iyād (d. 187/803).³⁸ One day a group of people came to visit him in Mecca and asked him to instruct them (*an yunlī 'alaynā*).³⁹ It is clear that they were after adages and wisdom statements regarding life and its meaning. Al-Fuḍayl answered that they had neglected the Qur'ān to the extent that it was now lost to them (*dayya'tum al-Qur'ān*) and instead are seeking his words and the words of people like him. They should instead devote themselves to the Qur'ān, for if they had done that then they would have found in it the cure they seek (*law tafarraghtum li-kitāb Allāh 'azz wa-jall la-wajadtum fīhi shifā'an li-mā turīdūn*). The visitors protested their innocence, saying that they had indeed studied the Qur'ān already. To that he retorted by saying that the study of the Qur'ān is a never-ending endeavor. It would take their lives and those of their children and grandchildren before they could even possibly finish

³⁶ Ibid. fol. 17(a): *Bāb fī faḍl al-Qur'ān wa-al-taḥḥīb fih*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ On al-Fuḍayl see *EF*, v. 2:936.

³⁹ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M98, fol. 18 (a).

the task. They must learn its grammar, its clear and obscure verses, its legal injunctions, its abrogating and abrogated verses. Short of doing all that, they have no business seeking the words of people like himself. Once more we see that al-Tha'labī was clear about what comes first when it comes to religious piety. The Qur'ān trumps all other forms of devotion and expressions of piety.

The chapter finishes with a story of a jurist, Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), in which he laments the fact that he spent his life haggling over the fine points of the law (to be more precise, over domestic discord), forgetting the study of the Qur'ān. Sufyān is full of apprehension about Judgment Day, fearful of how he is going to face God with such a shortcoming (*fa-mādhā naqūl li-rabbīnā fī al-ma'ād*).⁴⁰ In this anecdote al-Tha'labī leaves no doubt that the jurists were his professional rivals. We are entitled to infer that al-Tha'labī thought that quranic studies do not constitute only the most important field of study, but also that jurists would come to regret neglecting its study one day.

*On Interpretation and Ta'wīl*⁴¹

Al-Tha'labī concludes the introduction to his commentary with a chapter on the meaning of interpretation (*tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*) and the difference between them.⁴² The function of *tafsīr*, according to many scholars, al-Tha'labī informs us, is the unveiling (*al-kashf*) of the subject matter of the verse, its story, its meaning,⁴³ and the reasons behind its revelation.⁴⁴ *Ta'wīl*, on the other hand, is the rendering of the meaning of the verse (*ṣarf al-āyah*) into a different meaning that it might entertain (*ma'nā yaḥtamiluh*) which is consistent with what comes before and after it.⁴⁵

Al-Tha'labī goes on to explain that because *tafsīr* is restricted to the subject matter (*sha'n*) of the verse and the reasons behind its rev-

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Since there is no suitable equivalent for the word *ta'wīl*, I chose to leave it in Arabic.

⁴² Ibid., fol. 18(a): *Bāb fī al-tafsīr wa-al-ta'wīl wa-al-farq baynahumā*.

⁴³ Al-Tha'labī would omit this word in his rephrasing of the same definition a few lines further on in his discussion, see note 46 below.

⁴⁴ *Al-Kashf*, M98, fol. 18(a): *al-mufasssīr yakshif 'an sha'n al-āyah wa-qisṣatihā wa-ma'nāhā wa-al-sabab alladhī unzilāt fih*.

⁴⁵ Ibid., fol. 18(b): *wa-al-ta'wīl ṣarf al-āyah ilā ma'nā yaḥtamiluh muwāfiq li-mā qablahā wa-mā ba'dahā*.

elation, and because *tafsīr* is based on information that one learns from the tradition, it is an area in which one cannot adduce new material; *tafsīr* thus involves all the information the scholars have received about certain verses from previous generations reaching back to Muhammad and his followers: the why and when about them. *Tafsīr* as such is a matter which is dependent on learning (*samā'*) and therefore it is forbidden (*mahẓūr*) to speculate in this area.⁴⁶ Since *ta'wīl* is the art of explaining the Qur'ān in a way that is coherent and consistent, it is not forbidden for scholars to engage in it as long as the explanation is in agreement with the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.⁴⁷

Al-Tha'labī thus restricts the forbidden area where scholars are not allowed to venture to the merely historical: where and why a verse was revealed. It is also important to note here that al-Tha'labī, unlike al-Ṭabarī, does not discuss in his introduction the famous quranic verse 3:7, the *locus classicus* for the debate on the limits of what can and cannot be explained in the Qur'ān.⁴⁸ By omitting any reference to this famous verse from his introduction—a verse that declares the Qur'ān to consist of two types of verses, the clear and the ambiguous⁴⁹ al-Tha'labī takes a radical position in favor of the liberties of the exegetes in matters hermeneutical. He simply does

⁴⁶ Ibid., fol. 19(a): *al-Tafsīr 'ilm nuzūl al-āyah wa-sha'nihā wa-qisṣatihā wa-al-asbāb allatī nazalat fihā fa-hādihā wa-adrābuhā mahẓūrūn 'alā al-nās al-qawl fihī illā bi-al-samā' wa-al-athar*. It is important to note here that al-Tha'labī omitted in this rephrasing the word 'meaning' (*ma'nā*) which appeared in the first instance of this definition, cf. note 43 above.

⁴⁷ Ibid., *fa-ammā al-ta'wīl fa-al-qawl fihī aṣḥat li-annahu ṣarf al-āyah ilā ma'nā yaḥtamiluh wa-laysa bi-mahẓūrūn 'alā al-'ulamā' istinbāṭuhū wa-al-qawl fihī ba'da an yakūna muwāfiqan li-al-kitāb wa-al-sunnah*. Never mind the circularity of the argument here: one interprets the Qur'ān according to what agrees with the Qur'ān! What al-Tha'labī really means is that the interpretation should not disagree with the dogma that is claimed to be based on the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. In his case it means the Sunni dogma.

⁴⁸ The verse reads: "It is He who revealed to you the Book. Some of its verses are precise in meaning (*muhkam*)—they are the foundation of the Book—and others ambiguous (?) (*mutashābihāt*). Those whose hearts are infected with disbelief follow the ambiguous parts, so as to create dissension by seeking to explain it. But no one knows its meaning except God (and) those who are well-grounded in knowledge say: We believe in it; it is all from our Lord." The controversy centered on two points: what are the ambiguous parts of the Qur'ān, and whether the well-grounded in knowledge know their meaning or not (depending on how you read the 'and' between the two sentences. See McAuliffe's article "Quranic Hermeneutics," for the views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr on this matter. For a historical study of the two terms see Leah Kinberg, "Muhkamāt and Mutashābihāt (Koran 3/7): Implications of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis," *Arabica* 35 (1988): 143–172.

⁴⁹ See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, Maḥmūd Shākir, ed. (Cairo, 1961), v. 1: 73–76.

not even entertain the idea that any verse in the Qur'ān can be ambiguously interpreted (*mutashābih*), in the sense that it cannot be supplied with an explanation.

When discussing this very verse, 3:7, in the body of the commentary, al-Tha'labī supports the interpretation that views scholars as partakers in God's knowledge of every aspect of Qur'ān interpretation, even the ambiguous parts.⁵⁰ At one point in his argument he highlights, rather triumphantly, the fact that exegetes never desisted from interpreting any verse because it was ambiguous (*mutashābih*), including the mysterious letters.⁵¹ His reference to the mysterious letters here is very significant, because some exegetes in a hermeneutical sleight of hand, tried to confine the category of the ambiguous to these mysterious letters. This was a most convenient ploy, since the net result of explaining or not explaining these mysterious letters is the same: they are insignificant as a source of both law or ethics.⁵² To al-Tha'labī nothing in the Qur'ān is beyond the reach of the probing eyes of an exegete, not even the inscrutable. By reminding the reader that, regardless of the theoretical position of any exegete, they all indulged in interpretations, al-Tha'labī wants to say that the Sunni tradition, despite all its protestations to the contrary, never shied away from interpreting anything in the Qur'ān.

But what does al-Tha'labī think about the import of the word 'ambiguous' (*mutashābih*) in verse 3:7? After adducing all the possible interpretations that historically had been put forward, al-Tha'labī finishes by weighing in favor of the interpretation that defines the word *mutashābih* as 'similar in content'. Thus the word *mutashābih* has nothing to do with ambiguous content; it simply means verses that resemble each other in meaning and in style. In this light the Qur'ān is seen by al-Tha'labī to be made up *in toto* both of clear verses, since it is all clear and interpretable, and of similar verses (*mutashābih*), since they repeat and reaffirm each other.⁵³

Al-Tha'labī, both in his introduction and in the interpretation he

⁵⁰ Al-Tha'labī, *Al-Kashf*, M100, fols. 4(b)–9(b).

⁵¹ Ibid., fol. 8(a). Al-Tha'labī is quoting Ibn Qutaybah from his *Ta'wīl mushkil al-Qur'ān*, Aḥmad Ṣāqir, ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1973), 100.

⁵² Al-Ṭabarī is one of those who took the ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*) to be the mysterious letters. See *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 4: 180.

⁵³ Addressing the reader al-Tha'labī says: "know that all of the Qur'ān is clear (*muhkam*) from the point of view that it contains nothing but what is right and firm, did not God say: {A book with firm verses} [Qur'ān 11:1] and all of the Qur'ān is similar (*mutashābih*) since the verses resemble each other in beauty and affirm each other in content." *Al-Kashf*, M100, fol. 6(a).

gives to verse 3:7, is thus unwilling to put any limits on the activities of an exegete. This will be reflected in the body of his commentary, in which he does not limit his commentary to quotations from established authorities in the field—namely early generations of scholars who were enshrined by al-Ṭabarī in his commentary—but quotes scholars of subsequent generations up to his own age. He even quotes from anonymous commentaries without stating a name or title.⁵⁴

B. An Overview of al-Tha'labī's Hermeneutical Theory

It is clear from the foregoing exposition that exegesis for al-Tha'labī amounts to more than mere explication. Exegesis is not only a science (*ilm*) but also a craft (*ḥirfah*) and a profession (*ṣan'ah*). Thus, providing a paraphrastic explanation for a verse does not qualify as interpretation, nor does dabbling in this science qualify one for the rank of exegete. Exegesis is an edifice, and exegetes are professionals who spend their lives cultivating this art.

Explication or bare-bones interpretation is, according to al-Tha'labī, just one out of fourteen aspects that he deems necessary in any commentary. It is this integrated approach to exegesis, a conscious attempt at comprehensiveness, that differentiates al-Tha'labī's commentary from any previous work. Al-Tha'labī, standing at the crest of a long tradition of Muslim intellectual involvement with the Qur'ān, saw a fragmentation in this tradition: interpreters who neglected the legal precepts of the Qur'ān, quranic readers who concerned themselves only with variant readings, and commentaries that did not address doctrinal issues. Exegesis before al-Tha'labī elaborated none of the stories of the Qur'ān and overlooked the moral lessons to be learned; finally, exegetical works were anything but organized or user-friendly, naively unaware of exegesis as a book-producing enterprise. Al-Tha'labī instead aimed at integration (*shumūl*) and comprehensiveness (*jāmi'*); his was a commentary that included all the rubrics of the Islamic sciences and fields, yet he was determined to present a work that was manageable and unthreatening. He wanted a rounded work, a work that uses philology as well as history, includes theology as well as law.

⁵⁴ He usually introduces these quotations by the statement: I saw in some commentaries (*wa-ra'ayt fī ba'd al-tafāsīr*).

By making exegesis the comprehensive abode for all the Islamic sciences, al-Tha'labī positioned it as the equivalent of what *adab* compendia were to the secular sciences. If *adab* encyclopedias, by combining poetry, prose, proverbs, wisdom, and stories of old lore, were to create the perfect man of taste, then exegesis, through its rendering of the intentions and the word of God, was to create the perfect Muslim. In the interpretation of the Qur'ān all the tools and sciences of the Muslim civilization were employed: grammar, poetry, history, dogma, law, and philology. But they were there to bring out a transformation in the believer. Quranic exegesis after al-Tha'labī became a main repository for Islamic moral education.

What al-Tha'labī thereby helped to create was a new tradition of encyclopedic commentaries.⁵⁵ Al-Tha'labī should be viewed as part of the general trend that was sweeping the intellectual life in the Islamic world, where authors had started to write encyclopedic works in different fields. His commentary included more than what was usual and customary in an exegetical work on the Qur'ān. The method perfected by al-Ṭabarī was a dead-end method: one could not solely base quranic exegesis on the activities of the early generations of commentators.⁵⁶ By giving primacy to past generations it helped create a radical hermeneutics that proclaimed that only the *salaf* (early generations) know the interpretation of the Qur'ān. This view would be taken later to its logical conclusion by Ibn Taymīyah and his student Ibn Kathīr: only Muhammad, his companions, their followers (*tābi'ūn*), and the early generation of scholars (*salaf*) according to this view, know the true interpretation of the Qur'ān.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, others after al-Ṭabarī were voicing new views on the meaning of the Qur'ān. Sciences such as lexicography and rhetoric were being perfected and a new approach to the Qur'ān as a whole was needed. Al-Tha'labī believed that the insights into the Qur'ān these scholars were bringing had a place in his commentary. This is evident from both his definition of *ta'wīl*, and more importantly, his incorporation into his commentary of the interpretations of scholars whom he calls "the people of this era" (*ahl al-ʿaṣr*): the scholars whose works appeared in the period between the death of al-Ṭabarī

⁵⁵ Encyclopedic commentaries should not be simply equated with bulky commentaries.

⁵⁶ Although some commentators argued that this is the only way to do exegesis.

⁵⁷ See Chapter Seven for more on this issue.

and the time of the writing of al-Tha'labī's work.⁵⁸ In many instances al-Tha'labī simply starts a quotation by the phrase, 'I heard some exegetes say,' suggesting that he is quoting a colleague whose opinion he considers worthy of mention. It is not unusual to encounter in the commentary emphatic assertions that this or that interpretation is what 'I think' or X thinks.⁵⁹

Al-Tha'labī's definition of *ta'wīl* as "the rendering of the meaning of a verse in a way that is consistent with what comes before and after it" opened wide possibilities for him. First, it meant that it was possible to have more than one meaning for a verse, usually several, so long as they are in harmony with the context of the verse, and al-Tha'labī never hesitated from adducing varied interpretations for a certain verse. Second, it also meant that he could adduce, side by side, contradictory explanations for the same verse so long as each holds its cogency on its own. Third, it meant that he could allow political interpretations into the body of his commentary as long as they were consistent with the flow of a sura and did not depart from the usual Sunni/Shī'ī dichotomy of the Muslim community.

Finally, the premise of the polyvalency of a verse upon which al-Tha'labī's introductory definition of *ta'wīl* rests allowed him to incorporate mystical interpretations of the Qur'ān into his work, without giving in to the premise of mystical hermeneutics: that there is a division between inner and outer reality. The mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān was founded on the premise that the Qur'ān has two layers of meaning: an outer level, a "*ẓāhir*," which, according to the mystics, comprised all the output of the traditionally-minded exegetes; and an inner level, a "*bāṭin*," a meaning that is veiled from ordinary mortals who are usually unprepared to venture into the depth of the Qur'ān. A mystic was thus privy to the inner meaning of the Qur'ān and that meaning was only attainable through an encounter with the text that rested upon (mystical) experience. In no place in his commentary does al-Tha'labī adopt this mystical view of the Qur'ān. Yet, by the malleable definition he gives to *ta'wīl* he could easily add the mystical interpretations—on their own, mystical interpretations are coherent—without being a mystically oriented exegete. Thus,

⁵⁸ Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 51. Al-Tha'labī has, of course, also included commentaries from the first two centuries that al-Ṭabarī did not include.

⁵⁹ See for example the explanation for verse 13:33, where al-Tha'labī quotes his teacher Ibn Ḥabīb saying, "the meaning of this verse according to my views," (*wa-manā al-āyah 'indī*). See *al-Kashf*, M103, fol. 138b).

his commentary furnishes a large number of the verses with a mystical level of interpretation that were copied from the work of al-Sulamī.⁶⁰

But the expansive definition of *ta'wīl* that al-Tha'labī furnishes is not only malleable but it could also prove dangerous. It could open the gate for a flood of interpretations, including those doctrinally in conflict with one another, since each interpretation could ultimately be claimed to be consistent with the surrounding context. What is then the limit of this process, and where does an exegete draw a line and declare an interpretation unfit or unsound? How do we distinguish between the valid and the invalid? Al-Tha'labī is clear about the criterion—and he has only one—for accepting or rejecting an interpretation (*ta'wīl*): compatibility with the Qur'ān and the Sunnah (*ba'd an yakūna muwāfiqan lil-kitāb wa-al-sunnah*). This answer, of course, muddles more than it clarifies. What does al-Tha'labī mean by Qur'ān and what by Sunnah? Our answers may vary, but the criterion is evidently not philological. It is doctrinal. By Qur'ān and Sunnah, al-Tha'labī means the Sunnī creed as it had been outlined by his time. The ultimate judge for the validity of an interpretation is thus its compatibility with the proper doctrinal views of the exegete.⁶¹ Sound philological interpretations are in themselves no guarantee for acceptance. This should not surprise us, since we have seen that the function of exegesis for al-Tha'labī was primarily religious and not an enterprise in purely linguistic or philological inquiry. That is why he could throw out all the production of the Mu'tazilī school of exegesis without any hesitation: they have the wrong dogma and their exegesis is thus suspect regardless of its method.

This brings us to the ultimate dilemma of medieval quranic exegesis: how to rein in philology and avoid philologically sound interpretations that are nevertheless doctrinally repugnant. Or to put the matter differently, how to work philologically yet preserve a coherent doctrinal system. This tension was never really resolved, and when a contradiction between a philological interpretation and an

⁶⁰ For a general introduction to the mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān, see Gerhard Böwering's *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'anic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Saḥl al-Tustarī* (d. 283/896) (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979). On Sulamī, see the bibliography for articles by the same author.

⁶¹ Not unlike St. Augustine's rule in his *On Christian Teaching* (*De doctrina christiana*), Book One 41. See the translation of R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27.

accepted doctrinal one arose, exegetes invariably sided with dogma.⁶²

The last point to which I would like to draw attention is al-Tha'labī's awareness of the importance of the structure and form of the exegetical product. Exegesis for him also meant a book, a physical work that has a function as a transmitter to the reader. The care with which he presented his material, and the fact that he took into consideration the interests of the reader reflects the influence *adab* compendia had left on him. He shared the concern of men of literature about the readability of their works. One could also argue that the last of his fourteen aspects which deals with miscellaneous reports about the Qur'ān (*al-akhbār al-muta'alliqāt*) is the counterpart in exegetical strategy to the digressive principle of al-Jāḥiẓ and other literature writers who, in order to prevent monotony, allowed digression.

In addition to delineating al-Tha'labī's approach to the Qur'ān, I have tried to show that al-Tha'labī was the product of his cultural environment. Perhaps now, after seeing the deep influence the *adab* tradition left on him, we would not be surprised to learn about his connection with literary circles. The professor of prosody who spoke highly of him was apparently not only a colleague but felt an intellectual affinity with our author. It is also fitting that the student of al-Tha'labī, al-Wāḥidī, was himself a major literary critic, one whose work on al-Mutanabbī is still a classic for both its philological acumen and literary sensitivity.

⁶² As one example, I cite the great exegete al-Rāzī who after giving what he thought was the correct interpretation of a word according to the rules of philology remarked that tradition overrules this meaning since the accepted meaning is different. See his comments on the term *furqān*, *sub* 25:1.

CHAPTER FIVE

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: THEMES AND FOCI

In the previous chapter, where I analyzed al-Tha'labī's hermeneutical theory as presented in his introduction, I voiced the need to differentiate between his theoretical understanding of interpretation and his actual practice.¹ The reason for this two-pronged approach is that al-Tha'labī was working inside an already highly-articulated tradition of quranic exegesis which imposed limits on the nature and extent of innovations that were possible or admissible. Modifications and innovations could only succeed if they permitted a sense of continuity and harmony with the old way of doing exegesis. One could not afford to completely break away from the tradition totally, for the tradition would have certainly retaliated. To those adventurous scholars who did depart from the tradition, like the author of the British Library manuscript Or. 8049, the punishment came swiftly. Their work was simply discarded. It is a testimony to the genius of al-Tha'labī that his innovations were, more often than not, seamlessly joined with the old method. Yet the cumulative effect of his innovations was transformative. The imprints that al-Tha'labī left on the classical exegetical tradition are not only apparent, but his work was to become the blueprint for many later commentaries.

Moreover, a theory of interpretation with no textual corollary, which al-Tha'labī presented in his introduction, is impossible to assess. He never gives an example of how he intends to interpret a given verse. The converse is also true in the body of his commentary. He never explains how his theory is directing any particular explanation he is offering. Thus we are left to deduce the rules that are

¹ Cf. with Mark Hazard's remarks on the need to study the works of medieval Christian exegetes independently of the introductions to such works: "Until recently, scholarly attention to definitions of the senses has on the whole been directed toward the theoretical pronouncements of medieval commentators, such as one often finds in prologues. Such formulations of the literal sense, however, give little idea of the flexibility with which commentators employed the senses. If we want to understand how interpretation of the Bible was actually practiced, we have to look beyond the prologues to the commentaries themselves" in his *The Literal Sense and the Gospel of John in Late Medieval Commentary and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xvi.

implicit in his approach. We of course do run the danger of imposing our own understanding of what these implicit rules are, but we have no other option but to embark on a textual analysis that takes into consideration what he has already articulated in his introduction.

In the following two chapters I offer a detailed study and analysis of al-Tha'labī's hermeneutics. In doing so I analyze his method on what I call the micro-level, through a close reading of his commentary, and on the macro-level, by situating al-Tha'labī in the tradition which was both forming him and being formed by him. In the end, a study of al-Tha'labī is a study of the *tafsīr* genre itself. Hence I have compared al-Tha'labī to al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Qurṭubī. Other exegetes have also been drawn into the picture when that was deemed instructive. I have avoided the use of the terms "haggadic," "masoretic" and "halakhic," popularized by Wansbrough in his *Quranic Studies*. I believe that these terms, however useful they may have been at one time, have, in the context of quranic studies, ceased to add to our understanding of this tradition.² Instead, I use terms and terminology developed at the end of a deductive reading of the material, thus precluding the danger of predetermining my analysis.

There is a methodological problem that, so far, I have avoided discussing. How can a study of a limited portion of a work claim to be representative of the genre it belongs to? In other words, this study is by its nature limited to the examples I have chosen, and since the *tafsīr* genre is impossibly vast, how could my examples, numerous as they are, be representative of the *tafsīr* tradition? Indeed, how can tens of examples from al-Tha'labī be representative of al-Tha'labī's method when his book *al-Kashf* is in 13 large volumes? To make my study as representative as possible, I have decided to study a continuous large section of his work. I have chosen the last portion of the Qur'ān, or what is traditionally called *juz' 'ammā* (suras 78–114).³ Moreover, I decided to make random selections from the rest of the commentary. Short of doing a full study of the work, I am not sure how

² One is bound to question the usefulness of these terms as tools to describe *tafsīr* especially since scholars working on midrash are casting serious doubt on the merit of these terms in advancing our knowledge of the inner working of midrash. See Alexander Samely's *Rabbinic Interpretation of Scripture in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24–25, for a critique of these terms as descriptive terms.

³ Traditional Muslim scholarship divided the Qur'ān into 30 equal parts (*juz'*). The 30th part is the one with the highest number of suras; this was one of the reasons why I chose it for my study.

else one can remedy this methodological problem. In this regard I have grown far more respectful of the scholastic method of commentaries in which medieval Muslim scholars engaged. Their commentaries and super-commentaries on other commentaries are not non-exegetical works or a reflection of medieval decadence. A study on a commentary has to be, willy-nilly, another complete commentary!

The two chapters are divided into ten sections. Each section is devoted to a detailed study of a particular characteristic of al-Tha'labī's hermeneutics. The characteristics analyzed here are not comprehensive. I have rather attempted to concentrate on those that are most indicative of the transformation that the genre underwent. I have striven to give as many examples as possible. Since most of the exegetical literature is not available in English, I have translated most of the examples. Moreover, most of the examples have been transliterated in footnotes. Thus, readers of Arabic will be able to follow my arguments closely. I have purposely avoided the narrative sections of the Qur'ān and how al-Tha'labī dealt with them, since a study of al-Tha'labī's narratology is beyond the scope of this work.⁴ It is my hope that an edition of *al-Kashf* will make a study of al-Tha'labī's narrative interpretations a more feasible endeavor in the future.

A. Merit-of-sura Preambles

Each of al-Tha'labī's commentaries on the 114 suras (chapters) of the Qur'ān begins with a number of ḥadīths (prophetic traditions) recounting the merits a believer incurs by reading or reciting that particular sura.⁵ As we have discussed earlier, al-Tha'labī was the first to introduce this type of tradition into quranic commentaries. Indeed, al-Tha'labī would pay heavily for incorporating these traditions, which were considered of dubious authenticity. But the puritanical ḥadīth scholars, who accused al-Tha'labī of shoddy scholarship, ultimately failed to realize that for the Muslims, the Qur'ān had

⁴ Tilman Nagel has already discussed some of the issues related to al-Tha'labī's narrative exegesis. For Nagel's work see the bibliography.

⁵ Not only suras were prefaced with merit traditions, but many of the important verses in the Qur'ān that have come to stand for a prominent religious symbol, such as *Ayat al-Kursī*, the Throne verse, (2:255), and the last two verses of sura 2 (285–286), were preceded by these traditions as well. On verses 2:285–6 see *al-Kashf*, M 99 fol. 212(b)-fol. 213(a).

become the centerpiece of their piety. The salvational efficacy of the Qur'ān through recitation had become an article of faith, and prophetic traditions that corroborated this fact were impossible to reject en masse. They would eventually be admitted. Al-Tha'labī's pioneering incorporation of the traditions is yet another example of his astute sensibility when it comes to the Qur'ān and its place in the religious life of its Muslim audience.

The merit-of-sura hadiths are prophetic traditions that promise the reader of the Qur'ān varied rewards. Reading sura 91, for example, is said to be equivalent to the act of giving the whole earth as alms to the poor.⁶ The rewards promised by these traditions include benefits and advantages that are reaped in this world, such as acquiring wealth, avoiding hardships, and a guarantee of a blissful, uneventful life.⁷ Sura 95 bestows on its reader good health (*ʿāfiyah*) and certitude in faith (*yaqīn*).⁸ Those who would like to avoid divine wrath and be spared from hails of rocks (*qadhf*) or disfigurement (*maskh*) are advised to read sura 105. Some suras can do more than one thing at a time; sura 109 is a good example. The reciter of this sura is assured success in trade as well as that he or she will be invested with an aura of respectability (*haybah*). It can also protect against machinations of the devil and the demons.⁹

The suras that are claimed to be the most effective in influencing the well-being of those who recite them are of course the last two of the Qur'ān. Known collectively as the *mu'awwidhatān* (apotropaic), suras 113 and 114 have played a central role in the religious life of Muslims throughout the centuries.¹⁰ They are recited and read as incantations to ward off evil; Muhammad is said to have considered them to be the best apotropaic incantations ever.¹¹ The merits and benefits claimed for these two suras differ markedly from the claims for the rest of the suras in the Qur'ān for the simple reason that their subject matter corresponds with their putative function. With their dark ominous

⁶ *man qara' surat al-Shams fa-kannamā taṣaddaqa bi-kull shay' ʾalāʾat ʾalayhi al-shams wa-al-qamar*. Ibid., M107, fol. 86(a).

⁷ The rewards for reading sura 92.

⁸ *man qara'a surat wa-al-Tin d'fāhu Allāh khūṣṣatayn al-ʿāfiyah wa-al-yaqīn mā dāma fi dār al-dunyā*. Ibid., M107, fol. 86(a).

⁹ Ibid., M107, fol. 169(b).

¹⁰ Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qoran*, Bearbeitet von Friedrich Schwally, (Nachdruck Hildesheim, 1961) v. 1: 108–110.

¹¹ *afḍal ma ta'awwadha bi-hi al-muta'awwidhūn*, *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 191(b).

images and their obscure language, they seem to accord to evil forces in the universe the rank of demigods; God is the only recourse left in face of such terror and consequently, He alone can protect the reciter. The content and function are here inseparable.¹² This is in stark contrast to the previous examples where the content of the suras bear little relevance to their effect.¹³ Thus sura 109, whose supposed effects are on trade and one's social standing, deals with unbelievers. It would not seem farfetched to view in suras 113 and 114 the catalyst that triggered the whole phenomenon of the merit-of-sura genre. One could argue that the believers extended the function of the two last suras of the Qur'ān to the whole book.

While reading some of the suras can result in material gain, the great majority of suras promise rewards to be reaped on Judgment Day and in the hereafter. It is these traditions that predominate in the preambles to each sura. Thus the reader of sura 93 will be made eligible by God for Muhammad's intercession;¹⁴ God will also write in the reader's book-of-deeds ten good deeds (*hasanah*) for each orphan and needy person that ever lived.¹⁵ The reader of sura 98 will be in the company of the saved on Doomsday,¹⁶ while reading sura 101 will cause the scale of deeds to tilt in favor of the good deeds.¹⁷ Those who read sura 107 will be forgiven their sins as long as they have given the alms tax (*al-zakāt*).¹⁸ Sura 108 guarantees its readers the privilege of drinking from the rivers of paradise.¹⁹

¹² These two chapters created unease in some believers. We have reports that they were not included in the Ibn Mas'ūd codex. See Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qoran*, v. 1: 110.

¹³ Though many of the rewards are fashioned after images in the chapters concerned in a sort of emotive association. For example, sura 111, which supposedly talks about the unbeliever Abū Lahab and what punishment awaits him, would prevent the reader from coming into contact with this man (who lives in Hell). While sura 97, which supposedly deals with Ramaḍān (or a particular night in this month), guarantees its reader an equivalent reward of fasting for a whole month.

¹⁴ The hadith is referring to the famous eschatological intercession of Muhammad on behalf of his nation on Judgment Day. This intercession would make it possible for those whose deeds fall short of qualifying them to enter Paradise to be admitted nonetheless.

¹⁵ According to the Shari'ah each deed can be judged as good or bad. If a deed is deemed good it is written as a *hasanah* on one's book of deeds; if bad it is written as a *sayy'ah*.

¹⁶ *Al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 134(b).

¹⁷ Ibid., fol. 142(a).

¹⁸ Ibid., fol. 162(a).

¹⁹ Ibid., fol. 164(a).

Elements of fantastical imagination have also crept into this genre of hadith. When the descriptions of the palaces in paradise that one will acquire by reading sura 108 are written down in books—with a fine script, we are told—the books will fill the loads of a caravan of camels so large that it would cover the space between the east and the west.²⁰ In other instances reading certain suras takes the believer back to the time of the prophet, allowing the reader to witness and even partake of incidents involving the prophet himself. Thus reading sura 110 will be the equivalent of witnessing the conquest of Mecca by Muhammad, with all the religious blessing such a witnessing confers.²¹

Reading certain suras of the Qur'ān has the same religious significance as executing other prescribed rituals like prayers, fasting, almsgiving, and performing the *hajj*. Thus reading sura 97 is equal to the rewards of fasting the whole month of Ramaḍān and of keeping a night vigil during the Night of Power (*laylat al-Qadr*).²² Reading sura 106 has the same merit as circumambulating the Ka'bah in Mecca.²³

The final category of merits one incurs from reading certain suras of the Qur'ān is equal to the merit of reading larger parts of the Qur'ān itself. This apparently paradoxical claim is in fact a natural development in the process whereby the Qur'ān took on a central role in the ritual life of the Muslims. It reflects a situation in which reading the Qur'ān has gradually become far more important than performing any other ritual, and in which eventually the Qur'ān becomes the salvific tool par excellence. In reading the Qur'ān a believer can attain wealth and happiness in this world; by reading the Qur'ān he or she can obtain the same merit one incurs from fasting, praying, or visiting Mecca; indeed, the reader can be transported to the time of the prophet by simply reading certain suras of the Qur'ān; finally, reading the Qur'ān will grant the reciter redemption on Judgment Day. This all-engulfing quality of the Qur'ān, once unleashed, cannot be stopped, and reading parts of the Qur'ān becomes as efficacious as reading all of it. What these traditions are implying is that the Qur'ān is at once an all-encompassing and a self-encompassing instrument of salvation such that a part represents

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., fol. 171(b).

²² Ibid., fol. 123(a).

²³ Ibid., fol. 158(b).

the whole and the whole is reducible to certain parts. The collective redemptive powers of the Qur'ān are thus attainable by reading portions of it. By reading certain parts of the Qur'ān the believer is, as it were, reading all the Qur'ān.²⁴ This synecdochic aspect of the Qur'ān can make sense only on the salvific plane. Since redemption to a believer comes as a whole, and the act of reading the Qur'ān is the vehicle for such redemption, then reading any part of it should be sufficient.

Thus the reward for reading sura 96 is like the reward for reading all of the Qur'ān (*al-mufaṣṣal*),²⁵ while reading sura 102 is like reading a thousand verses.²⁶ Sura 109 is equal to a quarter of the Qur'ān, while sura 112 is equivalent to one third.²⁷

As I mentioned earlier, these merit-of-sura traditions are placed at the beginning of each sura, before the interpretation proper. The interpretive exercise by al-Tha'labī is thus preceded by a religious message about the worth of the reading of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān emerges from the merit-of-sura traditions as an all-embracing salvational tool: it improves the lives of the believers in this world, it enriches their spiritual experiences, and finally, it guarantees redemption in the world to come. The reader of the commentary is thus reminded ever so often that the first and foremost role of the Qur'ān is religious; and interpretation is simply a better road to the Qur'ān and not an end in itself. By placing these traditions at the beginning of the interpretation of each sura, al-Tha'labī is also making a statement about the priorities of his exegetical approach. For him exegesis is a way to God. This will become more apparent if we look at a later commentator, al-Zamakhsharī, who incorporated the same traditions in his commentary.²⁸ Although he copied these traditions from al-Tha'labī, al-Zamakhsharī relegated them to the very end of his commentary on each sura.²⁹ What came first for al-Tha'labī

²⁴ One can not overlook the democratizing effect of this tendency: illiterate believers can attain by reading these suras a religious merit they would never otherwise attain unless by an education. These suras, let us remember, are short (few lines at most) and easy to memorize. Indeed, they are at the core of what an ordinary Muslim even to this day commits to memory (all being from *juz' 'ammā*, the thirtieth section of the Qur'ān).

²⁵ M1107, fol. 88(b).

²⁶ Ibid., fol. 142(a).

²⁷ Ibid., fol. 186(b).

²⁸ See *al-Kashshaf 'an haqā'iq al-tanzīl wa-'uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta'wīl* (Beirut, n.d.) v. 4: 214–246, for the traditions on chapters 91–114.

²⁹ On the dependence of al-Zamakhsharī on al-Tha'labī, see Chapter Seven.

comes last for al-Zamakhsharī.³⁰ Indeed, one can argue that al-Zamakhsharī's arrangement of the material reflects his ambiguous attitude towards the material presented in these traditions. This is a textbook example of the significance of arrangement of material in classical commentaries as reflective of a doctrinal stand. In the next section I will discuss the salvific reading of the Qur'ān that lies at the heart of al-Tha'labī's hermeneutics.

B. The Qur'ān and the Believers: The Salvific Scripture

"To God belongs the east and the west. Whichever way you turn there is the face of God." (Qur'ān 2:115)

The notion of the Qur'ān as the vehicle of salvation that al-Tha'labī announces at the beginning of each sura is not a characteristic of the Qur'ān that is restricted to the act of recitation of the text only, as the ḥadīths seem to imply. Rather al-Tha'labī sees the Qur'ān as the bearer of a message of salvation apparent in the meaning of the text itself, not an extrinsic one bestowed on it by God as a favor for the believing reader. The very message of the Qur'ān was, according to al-Tha'labī, of and about salvation. Indeed, it is an aspect of the Qur'ān that is at the center of al-Tha'labī's hermeneutical enterprise.³¹ The notion of a salvific Qur'ān guides and predetermines the very nature of his interpretive act. Every verse of this Qur'ān has to point or allude to this salvific power, and on the whole it is usually not hard to make the Qur'ān speak this salvific voice, although that is not quite always so.³²

Let me provide some examples of what I mean by the notion of a salvific Qur'ān determining the interpretive work of al-Tha'labī.

³⁰ There is almost a hesitation to include these ḥadīths, as it were; they seem to be added as an after-thought, or as a harmless pious addition that is not deemed to add to the hermeneutical enterprise.

³¹ Like most of the characteristics of al-Tha'labī's hermeneutics, salvific interpretation is as old as the tradition itself. For an example of a not-yet-fully developed salvific interpretation preserved by al-Ṭabarī see his commentary on verse 2:195, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 2: 200–205. The best pre-Tha'labī example of salvific interpretation is that of 17:79, which was fully developed by al-Ṭabarī's time. It is the clarity, intensity, and the frequency of this method that differentiates al-Tha'labī's from others. On 17:79 see the later parts of this section.

³² See below on this point.

Verse 55:19, "He let forth the two seas that meet together," was understood by all exegetes up to al-Tha'labī's time as a reference to salt and fresh water seas, and al-Tha'labī offers an array of interpretation that reflects this understanding. Having dispensed with the traditional interpretations, al-Tha'labī offers a new meaning: "There exist between the creature (*al-'abd*) and his Lord two seas. The first one is the sea of salvation (*al-najāt*) and it is the Qur'ān; whoever upholds the Qur'ān is saved. The second is the sea of perdition (*halāk*) and it is the world; whoever grasps on to it and takes it as his resort, he shall perish."³³ This is a stark example of what I called the salvific interpretation of the Qur'ān. No exegete before—or that matter after—al-Tha'labī offers "the Qur'ān" as the meaning of one of the seas, a Qur'ān that saves. It is almost impossible to tell when a verse in the hands of al-Tha'labī will present us with the promise of salvation. Indeed, in many of the most enjoyable moments of reading *al-Kashf* one encounters the unexpected: a verse that has nothing to do with salvation pointed out as the very embodiment of God's grace.

Let me give another example. Verse 53:10, "and He revealed to His servant that He revealed" (*wa-awhā ilā 'abdihi mā awhā*), poses certain problems for any exegete. First there is an ambiguous reference to something revealed, the pronoun *mā*; consequently one is apt to ask about what was revealed. Second, the identity of the servant is not given. Or at least if we do know—Muhammad is the most obvious, of course—an exegete might not be willing to agree. For if it is indeed Muhammad who was the recipient of direct revelation, then why did God need Gabriel to do His work on other occasions according the traditional theory of quranic revelation?³⁴

Which problem in verse 53:10 an exegete decides to tackle tells us more about his approach and concerns than about the verse itself. Al-Ṭabarī for example is more interested in solving the ambiguous identity of the servant.³⁵ Though he quotes authorities who think it

³³ *Al-Kashf*, M106 fol. 37(a). Al-Ṭabarī has nothing to say about a sea that is the Qur'ān, his interpretation does not depart from a material understanding of a sea of water, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 27: 128; al-Zamakhsharī likewise mentions nothing of a sea that is the Qur'ān or anything about salvation (*najāt*), *al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 51. This is an example of the exegetical tradition refusing to admit one of the interpretations championed by al-Tha'labī.

³⁴ According to the Islamic theory of revelation, Gabriel acts as an intermediary between God and Muhammad.

³⁵ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 27: 47.

was Muhammad who was the recipient of the revelation, he is unwilling to grant this interpretation any validity. He personally thinks that the servant meant was Gabriel, and gives his reasons for holding this view. Clearly al-Ṭabarī does not want to jeopardize the neat theory of revelation that had become standard by his time. The grammatical points that he raises are not just unclear, but are raised simply to obfuscate the meaning further. Al-Thaʿlabī on the other hand offers a far more systematic interpretation of the verse.³⁶ First, he gives two possibilities for the identity of the servant: it could be Muhammad or Gabriel.³⁷ Al-Thaʿlabī, unlike al-Ṭabarī is unwilling to editorialize. Neither of the two possible meanings is given more weight. Here we can see that al-Thaʿlabī is far more interested in recording what the Muslim exegetes thought about the identity of the servant than offering the correct theological reading—Al-Zamakhsharī for example skirts the whole issue by avoiding any reference to the identity of the servant.³⁸ But more importantly, al-Thaʿlabī then cites several interpretations for the pronoun *mā*. It could be “that which God revealed” and the verse would mean: He revealed to His servant that which God revealed to him. It could also be sura 94 that was revealed. It is important to note that all the above mentioned interpretations adduced by al-Thaʿlabī so far are authority-based interpretations. By that I mean that each of them has either been mentioned before (by al-Ṭabarī) or is an interpretation on the authority of one of the early generation of Muslim exegetes (the likes of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Ibn Zayd, Saʿīd b. Jubayr, etc.).

Al-Thaʿlabī then introduces an interpretation that has not been adduced before. “It has been reported (*wa-qīl*),” he quotes, “that God revealed to him (Muhammad) that: ‘Paradise is barred to the prophets till you enter it, and it is barred to the non-Muslim nations till your nation enters it first’.”³⁹ It is interesting to note that what God has revealed to Muhammad is not a quranic verse (Qurʾān was what Muhammad always claimed was revealed to him from God) but the

³⁶ *Al-Kaṣhṣ*, M106, fol. 5(b).

³⁷ Introducing Gabriel into this verse totally changes its meaning; it thus becomes “and Gabriel revealed to Muhammad what God has revealed to him (meaning Gabriel).” (*fa-awḥā Jibrīl ilā rasūl Allāh mā awḥā ilayhi rabbuhu ʿazza wa-jalla*). Ibid., fol. 5(b).

³⁸ *Al-Kaṣhṣ*, v. 4: 38.

³⁹ *wa-qīl: awḥā ilayhi anna al-jannah muḥarramah ʿalā al-anbiyāʾ ḥattā tadkhulahā, wa-ʿalā al-umam ḥattā tadkhulahā ummatuka*.

salvific message that the Muhammadan nation (*ummatuka*) will be the first to be saved. The ambiguity of the text (*mā awḥā*) which prompted the exegete to look for the exact reference is now clear. What God revealed to Muhammad in this instance—a very unique instance I should add, since this is the only time when Muhammad saw God with his own eye—was not portions of the Qurʾān, nor any ritual injunction (like the five prayers in the story of the Ascension to Heaven), nor a moral admonition to his nation, but only a simple truth: that Muhammad’s nation is saved. This is no doubt one of the best examples in al-Thaʿlabī’s work of what I call salvific interpretation. Like the synechdochic properties of quranic recitation where one sura stands for the whole of the Qurʾān, so any quranic verse, when interpreted soteriologically, could stand for the whole message of the Qurʾān. What verse 53:10 reveals when interpreted in al-Thaʿlabī’s hands is the essence of the Qurʾān’s message.

Yet there is more. Quoting al-Nūrī, an early Baghdadi mystic, al-Thaʿlabī informs us that what was revealed to Muhammad was a secret (*sirr*).⁴⁰ Then al-Thaʿlabī quotes two lines of poetry that state that secrets between lovers (presumably between Muhammad and his God) are impossible to disclose either by gossip or by the pen. Here is a totally different approach to the problem of the ambiguity in the verse regarding the nature of the thing revealed to Muhammad. The very wording of the verse is, according to the mystics, indicative of its meaning. There is simply no problem in verse 53:10. God did not specify what He revealed because it was a secret that should not be made known. Clearly the mystics were eager to claim that Muhammad received revelation that was above and beyond the Qurʾān, a sort of esoteric knowledge that resembles their claim for the knowledge that is revealed to them in their trances. This verse is thus a very important verse for the Ṣūfīs and their claim to a mysterious connection to the divine.⁴¹

Yet something has been divulged. Al-Thaʿlabī has already revealed to the reader what God has told Muhammad. The secret of the Qurʾān is that it proclaims one truth: that God will save the Muslim

⁴⁰ *wa-suʿila Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī ʿanhu fa-qāla: ūhiyā ilayhi sirran bi-sirrin wa-laysa min sirrin fī sirrin*.

⁴¹ It is in this light that we have to understand one of the above-mentioned interpretations that specifies what was revealed as a specific sura of the Qurʾān. God, to the traditionalist, revealed nothing above and beyond the Qurʾān.

nation.⁴² By calling that which has been already intimated a secret, al-Tha'labī allows the reader to experience the revelatory moment anew as an intimate conversation with God. The disparate units of interpretation as offered by al-Tha'labī have a cumulative effect because of the way the material has been arranged. First we are told of what was revealed, then we are told it is a secret. The reader is already privy to the mystery that he realizes could not be disclosed either by speech or writing. The salvific message of the Qur'ān is both ineffable and resounding.⁴³

There are several hermeneutical implications that result from considering the Qur'ān a carrier of a salvific promise. The first is that rhetorically, the Qur'ān always has to address the community of believers since they are the recipient of the text and of the salvational promise. The Qur'ān has always to have the believers as the addressees, either directly or indirectly. Indeed, in most cases the Qur'ān does explicitly address and speak to an audience, but not in all instances. In the remaining parts of section B, I will discuss the latter kind of verses in the Qur'ān, and the interpretation al-Tha'labī offers to them, as a further example of the complexity of the interpretive exercise that he has to perform in light of his conception of the salvific message of the Qur'ān. The verses in question all resemble one another stylistically. They are quranic utterances that address Muhammad in personal direct speech using the suffix pronoun *-k* (you). For the sake of easy reference I call them *k*-verses.

These *k*-verses, as I have indicated, were chosen because of their rhetorical ambivalence in relation to the usual quranic discourse. That discourse, as I have just mentioned, is one directed at an audience:

⁴² It is interesting to note that in the mystic interpretive tradition, the secret is also the *shafā'ah* of Muhammad to his nation. See *Tafsīr al-Sulamī*, Br. Or. 9433, fol. 318(a) where one mystic says: *qāl bi-lā wāsiṭah fīmā baynahu wa-baynahu sirran ilā qalbihi 'alayhi al-salām lā ya'lam bihi aḥadun siwāhu bi-lā wāsiṭah illā fī al-'uqbā hīna yu'ṭīhi al-shafā'ah li-ummatihī*. See also Böwering, "From the Word of God to the Vision of God."

⁴³ The new interpretation given by al-Tha'labī of this verse (that God will save the *Ummah*) will become the explanation for the verse most quoted by subsequent exegetes. Indeed it is the only interpretation given by al-Zamakhsharī for this verse. See *al-Kashshaf*, v. 4: 38. Al-Qurṭubī copies al-Tha'labī, dropping the mystical interpretation (what was revealed was a secret) but raising the same question behind the mystical approach. Al-Qurṭubī is forced to ask whether what was revealed is a secret (*mubham*) or something known (*ma'lūm*). See *al-Jāmi'*, v. 17: 91–92. Here is an example of a salvific interpretation that would become the norm.

Muhammad, Meccans, believers, unbelievers, Jews and Christians.⁴⁴ Most of the statements addressed to Muhammad in the Qur'ān were also meant for his followers.⁴⁵ Even in cases where there is no direct correlation between what is said to Muhammad and his community, the Qur'ān makes the connection itself, or the legal scholars did.⁴⁶ Whoever may be the addressee in any particular verse, the Qur'ān was seen ultimately to carry a message, a lesson or a warning. The reader always expected a moral to be learned, and this was an expectation that predetermined the mode of reading.

The *k*-verses, however, are an exception. They are instances where the content is wholly concerned with Muhammad, with no direct or indirect reference to the believers. These verses are thus unusual and are rhetorically ambivalent in relation to the rhetorical thrust of the Qur'ān, where humanity as a whole is the intended audience, be they believers or unbelievers. As it happens, all the *k*-verses are from the Meccan period; some are from the earliest strata of revelation we have. It will become apparent as we proceed that in the exegetical tradition these personal *k*-verses were problematic points of encounter between the believer and the Qur'ān. Believers were never at ease when they stumbled across these Qur'ānic expressions, which they felt were exclusionist in nature: they, the believers, were apparently not being addressed. Al-Tha'labī demanded of exegesis that it create a harmony between the religious expectations of the reader and these rhetorically cacophonous verses.

These instances in which God turns to Muhammad and addresses him in a conversational tone, using the suffix *k*-(you), are disturbing

⁴⁴ Not much has been done on this area of quranic studies; see M. Abdel Haleem, "Grammatical Shift for Rhetorical Purposes: *Ilṭifāt* and Related Features in the Qur'ān," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 55 (1992): 407–431; Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān* (London: SCM Press, 1996): 224–255 (The Dynamics of Qur'anic Discourse); W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 65–68 (The dramatic form).

⁴⁵ The study in Islamic legal tradition of the discourse of the Qur'ān is a highly developed field as is evident in the literature of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. The relationship between quranic injunctions to Muhammad and Islamic law was of course of grave importance to the development of a coherent body of law. For an example in English of this literature see Bernard Weiss, *The Search For God's Law* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 389–446, esp. 435. See also the dissertation of Muhammad Bin 'Aṣṣī, *The Principles of 'umūm and takhṣīs in Islamic Jurisprudence* (Dissertation: The University of Edinburgh, 1988).

⁴⁶ As in sura 80, where Muhammad is being upbraided for not showing interest in a poor blind inquisitor, the Qur'ān then speaks of Man and his inequities.

moments for the reader because he is left out, almost obliterated from the semantic horizon.⁴⁷ The intimacy of the dialogue is menacing. In these moments the Qur'ān, which is the foundation of the reader's religious life, seems to make no reference to him; there is no apparent message mediated by this private conversation, and no moral to be learned there. Moreover, the historical time these instances bring to mind is not the Medinan period, where Muhammad and his community were more a unity than distinct entities, but the Meccan period, when Muhammad was alone for the most part, with heedless and blind human beings around him, refusing to see the light. Surely, the time it evokes is neither eschatological nor paradisiacal. The intimacy between Muhammad and his God reminds the believers of humanity's historical alienation from Him. Somehow God's turning to Muhammad is chilling, a reclusive gesture in an otherwise obtrusively demanding text. The face of God in these verses is turned away from the believers to face Muhammad; but since all along God has repeatedly said that his face is always facing humanity, something must be wrong with our understanding of these verses.⁴⁸

When confronted with these verses al-Tha'labī seems to have one question in mind: is God addressing Muhammad only?⁴⁹ Commenting on verse 47:19 'Know thou [Muhammad] therefore that there is no god but God,' al-Tha'labī starts with a quotation stating that the individual addressed is Muhammad, but the intended target is somebody else (i.e. Muhammad's nation). And, al-Tha'labī adds, "there exist in the Qur'ān many instances where this is the case" [my emphasis].⁵⁰ Recognizing that the believers' urge to intrude into the intimacy between Muhammad and God runs deep, al-Tha'labī makes a dogged attempt to turn these verses away from Muhammad toward the

⁴⁷ Since all exegetes were male, gender inclusiveness here would be misleading.

⁴⁸ Hence the subtitle of this section was a quranic quotation from among many about the ubiquity of the face of God.

⁴⁹ It was also the concern of most of the exegetes. See for example the remarks of al-Dahhāk and Mujāhid on verse 74:6 (give not, thinking to gain greater): "this was (an injunction) meant only for Muhammad" (*kāna hādhih li-al-nabī khāṣṣatan*). See M106, fol. 206(a). Most of the verses that were seen to be addressing Muhammad alone were those with legal implication, like allowing Muhammad to have more than four wives, or giving him a fifth of the booty. These were seen as prerogative of the prophetic mission, and did not upset the balance of the quranic discourse. The question was what to do with a verse that is not legal in content and addresses Muhammad only.

⁵⁰ *qāla ba'dhum al-khiṭāb li-al-nabī wa-al-murād bihi ghayruh, wa-akhawātuhā kaṭṭirah, al-Kāshf*, M105, fol. 126(b).

believer and the *ummah* (community). If the Qur'ān left the believers out, al-Tha'labī seems to say, he will force them in; the face of God could at no instant be turned away from his community. The salvational message of the Qur'ān cannot be disbarred from any of its verses.

A good example is verse 68:4 "surely thou [Muhammad] art upon a mighty morality."⁵¹ We should keep in mind that this verse presents no difficulty on the linguistic level; its diction is made up of simple common words and its structure is unproblematic. In al-Ṭabarī's commentary on this verse the discussion centers on Muhammad: his high moral attributes and his religiosity.⁵² The word *khuluq* (morality) is glossed as "Islam" in one interpretation, as "morality" or "conduct", which is based on the moral injunctions of the Qur'ān, in another. There is no reference here to the believers; and in so far as the addressee is Muhammad there was no expectation in the exegetical tradition that anybody else would figure in the interpretation of this verse.

Al-Tha'labī's commentary on the passage could not be more different and it is also far more extensive.⁵³ Al-Tha'labī's interpretation, which can be divided into four major parts, starts with the same two glosses for "morality" found in al-Ṭabarī. Al-Tha'labī then quotes a statement by Qatādah interpreting the phrase to mean "that he (Muhammad) abided by God's orders and abstained from what God forbade."⁵⁴ These three interpretations, which merely constitute the first part of al-Tha'labī's interpretation, comprise the traditional interpretation inherited from previous exegetes.

The second part consists of a string of mystical glosses taken from both known and anonymous exegetes. Al-Junayd is quoted as saying that Muhammad's morality was called mighty because he was concerned with God to the exclusion of all other things;⁵⁵ while al-Wāsiṭī

⁵¹ Here is the context of the verse quoted (verses 68:1-4): 'By the Pen, and what they inscribe, thou art not, by the blessing of thy Lord, a man possessed. Surely thou shalt have a wage unfailing; surely thou art upon a mighty morality.' Rudi Paret translates: 'und bist eine gewichtige Persönlichkeit (oder: vertrittst ein hohes Ethos; w. bist von gewaltiger Art). *Der Koran, Übersetzung* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1996), 402.

⁵² *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 29: 18-19.

⁵³ *Al-Kāshf*, M106, fols. 162(b)-163(b).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 162(b): *huwa mā kāna ya'tamir bihi min amr Allāh 'azza wa-jalla wa-yan-tahī 'an mā nahā Allāh subhānahu*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 162(b)-163(a): *ummiya khuluquh 'azīman li-annahu lam yakun lahu ḥimmah suwa Allāh ta'ālā*.

sees the reason for Muhammad's mighty morality in his forsaking the two worlds (the earthly and the otherworldly) in exchange for the Lord.⁵⁶ An anonymous mystic is quoted as saying that Muhammad's morality became mighty because he saw the insignificance of the created worlds in comparison to their creator.⁵⁷ In quoting these sources al-Tha'labī has so far reproduced the traditional exegetical tradition on this verse, as well as the non-traditional, the mystical. But in both cases the interpretations offered are *Muhammad-centered*. The Qur'ān is still facing away from the believers.

The third section of the interpretation of verse 68:4, however, is a transitional phase that changes the course of the exegetical exercise and directs the meaning of the verses away from Muhammad to the believers. Al-Tha'labī adduces an anonymous exegete who states that Muhammad's morality was described as mighty because he embodied in himself the noblest of moral attributes (*makārim al-akhlāq*).⁵⁸ The phrase *makārim al-akhlāq* (noblest of moral attributes) is a highly resonant one that has a long history in the Arabo-Islamic culture. The heathen Arabs, according to Muslim ideologues, despite their depraved, idolatrous religion, were possessed of a natural moral code that somehow corresponded with the Islamic moral code. The phrase that summed up this natural moral code was *makārim al-akhlāq*. Muhammad, the Muslims believed, was the perfection of this moral code, a belief shared by al-Tha'labī.⁵⁹ But does the quranic phrase 'mighty morality' really mean possessing the perfect moral character? Al-Tha'labī supports this interpretation by adducing as proof prophetic traditions that he proceeds to quote. In this, as in other instances, al-Tha'labī always starts his proof texts by the words *yadull 'alayh* (and what supports that).⁶⁰ He then cites a prophetic tradition, a ḥadīth, in which Muhammad states that he was sent as a prophet to complete or perfect the noblest of moral attributes.⁶¹ This ḥadīth, which depicts Muhammad as a sort of moral reformist, had never previously been adduced as an explanation for this verse. All the same, al-Tha'labī makes a connection between the quranic phrase

⁵⁶ Ibid., fol. 163(a): *li-annahu jad bi-al-kawwāyn 'uqad 'an al-haqq*.

⁵⁷ Ibid., *wa-qīl 'azuma khuluquh hayth saḡhura al-akwān fī 'aynih ba'da mushāhadat mukawwimihā*.

⁵⁸ Ibid., *wa-qīl summiya khuluquh 'azīman li-jīmā' makārim al-akhlāq fih*.

⁵⁹ Cf. note 61 below.

⁶⁰ Ibid., fol. 163(a). Other cognates are: *dalīlūh*, etc.

⁶¹ Ibid., *bu'ith li-utammim makārim al-akhlāq*.

"*khuluq 'azīm*" and the prophetic phrase "*makārim al-akhlāq*," since both are attributes of Muhammad and are linguistically similar. The verse in this light refers not to the moral character of Muhammad but to the fact that he was sent to perfect and complete the natural moral code. Muhammad's prophetic mission, then, is what was meant by this phrase in al-Tha'labī's view, and he will go on to connect the believers—the targets of Muhammad's mission—to this verse. The association of the two phrases results in a subtle transformation which will be the gateway for al-Tha'labī to introduce the final section of his interpretation.

In this final part al-Tha'labī quotes another prophetic tradition in which Muhammad states that his God has been his mentor in moral matters (*addabānī rabbī fa-aḡsana ta'dībī*). The causal chain is now complete: God taught Muhammad good behavior, and Muhammad was sent to perfect the moral code of the Arabs, hence to teach the believers—all this was imbedded in the phrase 'of mighty morality'. This hitherto undisclosed reasoning then allows al-Tha'labī to quote a ḥadīth that states that the believer can attain by 'good moral conduct' (*ḡusn khuluqih*) the rank of a devout worshiper who keeps night vigils and fasts continuously.⁶² Suddenly the verse is no longer concerned with Muhammad but with the moral character of the believers. Believers who have good moral character are as worthy as devout worshipers. Al-Tha'labī then quotes another ḥadīth that states that 'good moral conduct' is crucial when God weighs the deeds on Judgment Day.⁶³ A third ḥadīth enjoins the believers to cultivate good moral conduct because moral men will surely enter Paradise while unprincipled men will surely reside in Hell.⁶⁴ Al-Tha'labī finishes his commentary on verse 68:4 by quoting a ḥadīth that states that morally upright individuals are the most beloved by God, individuals who are humble in their demeanor and amicable. The people whom God detests the most are those who go about spreading rumors, sowing dissent among believers and finding faults where there are none.⁶⁵ Thus al-Tha'labī has strung together four ḥadīths

⁶² Ibid., *inna al-mu'min la-yudrik bi-ḡusn khuluqih darajāt qā'im al-layl sā'im al-nahār*.

⁶³ Ibid., fol. 163(b): *mā shay'un aḡḡal fī al-mizān min khulq ḡasan*.

⁶⁴ Ibid., *'alaykum bi-ḡusn al-khulq fa-inna ḡasan al-khuluq fī al-jannah lā maḡālah, wa-ḡyyākum wa-sū' al-khuluq fa-inna sayyi' al-khuluq fī al-nār lā maḡālah*.

⁶⁵ Ibid., *aḡabbukum ilā Allāh ta'ālā aḡsanukum aḡhlāqan, al-muwaḡḡ'ūn aktāḡfan alladhīn ya'lafūn wa-yu'lafūn, wa-abḡḡadukum ilā Allāh al-maḡshā'ūn bi-al-namīmah al-muḡarriḡūn bayna al-ikhwān al-muḡtamisūn li-al-burrā' al-aḡḡarāt*.

that talk about the moral character of the believers, not Muhammad. The transition has been completed. God, according to this reading, was all along addressing the believers from the very beginning.

It is important to note that the first three traditions quoted by al-Tha'labī in his fourth section build their effect gradually. The first hadith promises the morally upright believer the rewards of a devout worshiper; the second declares that good moral conduct will weigh heavily in the scale of deeds on Judgment Day; the third promises Paradise for such a believer. A laudatory phrase intended for Muhammad has become a salvational promise for the believers. Enjoining the believers to better themselves is what the Qur'ān's praise for Muhammad's moral character ultimately means.

By using unrelated traditional material that was lying around, al-Tha'labī was able to mold a new interpretation for a Qur'ānic verse without appearing to be inventing an unfounded explanation. If we were to ask what "peculiarity in the text," to use James Kugel's term, prompted al-Tha'labī's exegetical exercise, the answer would be the rhetorical discordance between verse 68:4 and the rest of the Qur'ān.⁶⁶ Al-Tha'labī saw the Qur'ān as a salvational book and each and every verse spoke to that effect. No verse in the Qur'ān was without a moral or spiritual lesson. Verse 68:4, with its reference to Muhammad alone, was disrupting to this view and, as such, it needed interpretation to correct the anomaly.

To highlight how original al-Tha'labī's approach to verse 68:4 was, we need only to compare it with al-Zamakhsharī's, who passes over verse 68:4 silently.⁶⁷ Verse 68:4, from al-Zamakhsharī's point of view, is philologically transparent, and syntactically boring. But verse 68:4 is not truly that facile. There is a marked difference between it and the rest of the Qur'ān. It does not speak to the believer. And that peculiarity arrested the interest of al-Tha'labī, thus provoking this lengthy interpretation. Al-Qurṭubī would go on to systematize al-Tha'labī's interpretation speaking about two issues regarding this verse. The first is Muhammad's high morality, the second is the believers' need to be morally upright.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of the Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 247.

⁶⁷ *Al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 126. See below on the Mu'tazilī views and the salvific interpretations.

⁶⁸ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, v. 18: 227–228.

"Surely We have given thee abundance" (Qur'ān 108:1)

Another example of the mode of interpretation adopted by al-Tha'labī, by which a verse that was originally addressed to Muhammad is turned away from him and directed towards the believers, is his commentary on verse 108:1 (quoted above). Harris Birkeland wrote an extensive study on sura 108 in which he convincingly argued that the word abundance (*al-kawthar*) in verse 1, a hapax legomenon in the Qur'ān, should only mean "abundant worldly goods" or "fortune, well-being."⁶⁹ With no textual basis, however, he goes further and specifies this 'abundance', thus adding his own interpretation to the medley of glosses we already possess from medieval authors. Birkeland was certain that the wealth meant was that of Khadījah, the wife of Muhammad. His argument, plausible as it is—and I tend to agree with it—remains an interpretation. The word abundance (*al-kawthar*), though familiar to classical lexicographers, is quite ambiguous in its reference in this verse. We will never be certain of the sort of wealth at stake here. Given the mercantile metaphors of quranic soteriological imagery, we can never be certain that in this instance the Qur'ān was not referring to something spiritual or religious.⁷⁰ Like the Muslim exegetes before him, Birkeland comes to the Qur'ān with his own outlook, which we happen to share: an outlook that has the evolutionary model at its base. Somehow, that model holds, religions develop in a linear manner, from the materially primitive to the more profoundly spiritual.⁷¹ Sura 108, one of the earliest of the quranic revelations, has thus to exhibit a certain primitivism, and Birkeland is determined to unearth it there. While Birkeland was in search of what the Qur'ān meant to its original audience, al-Tha'labī was in search of what it might mean to the *believer* in perpetuity. For al-Tha'labī the Qur'ān is the word of God addressed to *believers* and it speaks directly to them. While Birkeland sought to approach the philological-historical meaning, al-Tha'labī ebbed away from it.

Al-Tha'labī begins his interpretation of sura 108 by mentioning the reasons behind its revelation. One day while walking out of the

⁶⁹ *The Lord Guideth*, 56–76. This interpretation was one of many advanced by the Muslim exegetes, but it was not the dominant one.

⁷⁰ See Andrew Rippin, "The Commerce of Eschatology" in *The Qur'ān as Text*, Stefan Wild, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 125–135; also Charles Torrey, *The Commercial-theological Terms in the Koran* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1892).

⁷¹ Hence the subtitle of his book: *Studies on Primitive Islam*.

then still pagan shrine of Mecca, Muhammad met a certain al-ʿĀṣṣ b. Wā'il and they happened to chat for a moment. As al-ʿĀṣṣ entered the shrine he was questioned by the mighty elders of the tribe (*ṣanādīd Quraysh*) about the identity of his interlocutor. Al-ʿĀṣṣ answered that he was talking "with that childless" (*dhāk al-abtar*), meaning Muhammad, who with no male progeny was being mocked. The inference was that Muhammad's God was withholding from him the most precious gift given to a man according to the norms of this patriarchal tribal society.⁷² God then revealed this sura to console Muhammad and to inform him that "surely he that hates thee, he is childless (*abtar*)" (108:3).

After adducing a variant reading for one of the words in verse 108:1, al-Tha'labī starts his commentary on *al-kawthar* (abundance) by discussing the philological information available to him. *Al-kawthar* we are told is a noun form from the root *k-th-r* (to be abundant), which the Arabs used when they named an entity that is "great in number, or grave in importance."⁷³ Al-Tha'labī quotes a philologist who quotes an Arab informant who has heard a Bedouin woman answering the question, "with what did your son return from his journey?" with the remark, "he returned with *al-kawthar*." The philologist glosses *al-kawthar* with the phrase, "a large sum of money."⁷⁴ Thus in a matter of two lines, al-Tha'labī has disposed of the material that took Birkeland twenty pages to prove. But that was the departure point for al-Tha'labī, for whom exegesis starts after philology is understood. Al-Tha'labī points out that there is "a disagreement among scholars as to what it (*al-kawthar*) signifies here."⁷⁵ By this, he means that although we are certain of its lexicographic meaning, its significance in this verse remains unclear.

What is the import of *al-kawthar* here? In answering this question, al-Tha'labī starts by quoting a tradition which relates not only the story of how Muhammad received sura 108 (a different version from

⁷² The Qur'an will have another occasion to rebuke the believers concerning Muhammad's patrilineal decent: "Muhammad is not the father of any of the men from amongst thee" (33:40).

⁷³ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kāshf*, M107, fol. 164(b): *wa-al-ʿArab tusammī kull shay'in kathīrīn fī al-ʿadad aw kabīrīn fī al-qadr wa-al-khaṭar kawtharan*.

⁷⁴ Ibid., *qil li-ʿajūz rajī' ibnuhā min al-safar bi-mā āb ibnuk qālat āb bi-al-kawthar tānī bi-mālin kathīr*. Birkeland did not quote this statement since it was not available to him. It would have saved him a lot of arguments.

⁷⁵ Ibid., *wa-khtalafū fī al-murād bilī hāhunā*.

the one already given above) but also Muhammad's interpretation of the word *al-kawthar*. One day while Muhammad was in the company of some of his companions he happened to doze off for a while. He woke up with a smile and proceeded to tell his followers about a new sura that had been just revealed to him while asleep.⁷⁶ He then recited to them the new sura 108. He asked his companions if they knew the meaning of the word '*al-kawthar*.' None of them, of course, knew the answer. *Al-kawthar*, Muhammad said, "is a river in Paradise promised to me by God; the river has an abundance of goodness (*al-khayr al-kathīr*); it has a basin (*hawḍ*) to which my nation will gather to drink from (on Judgment Day); the basin has cups like the number of stars. But then a future generation (*qam*) of them will be prevented from drinking of its water, and I will scream to God, 'they are from my people,' and He will answer, 'you do not know what they did after you left them'."⁷⁷

This is a remarkable tradition, for not only does it offer a different reason for the revelation of the sura from the one mentioned at the beginning of the commentary, but it also harmonizes the three most widespread interpretations of *al-kawthar* which were current before the advent of al-Tha'labī. According to this tradition, sura 108 was revealed on an idyllic, blissful occasion: Muhammad among his companions, after a nap, with a happy smile delivering good tidings to the believers. There is a shift of emphasis in this tradition away from the bitterly sardonic *Schadenfreude* of the heathens toward "a childless prophet," to the paradisiac atmosphere of rivers and basins and abundance of goodness. Sura 108 is no more about verse 3, where the word *abtar* (childless) appears; rather, it is about *al-kawthar* (abundance and salvation). If the first story, which centered on Muhammad's humiliation by the mighty of his tribe, appeals to the historically-minded exegete (it does sound plausible), the second appeals to the believer, who sees the Qur'an as timeless and relevant to his religious experience. Sura 108 is no longer a defense of the wounded pride of Muhammad, but a proclamation of what awaits the believers in Paradise.

The tradition that al-Tha'labī incorporates here also harmonizes the different interpretations current before al-Tha'labī for *al-kawthar*.

⁷⁶ It is important here to point out that the reason for revelation given in this tradition is different from the one given at the beginning of the sura.

⁷⁷ Ibid., M107, fol. 165(a).

Al-Ṭabarī has already in his commentary given three distinct interpretations for *al-kawthar*.⁷⁸ The first is that it is a river in Paradise; the second is that it is an abundance of goodness (*al-khayr al-kathīr*); and the third is that *al-kawthar* is a basin (*hawḍ*) in Paradise. All the three elements are harmonized in the tradition quoted by al-Thaʿlabī: *al-kawthar* is a river that has an abundance of goodness that has a basin! This harmonizing tradition does not appear in al-Ṭabarī's text, but each constituent element does. But harmonization is the least of the innovations offered by this ḥadīth, for it also brings to the interpretation a salvational aspect never before advanced. While in al-Ṭabarī the river, the basin, and the abundance of goodness are all meant for Muhammad, al-Thaʿlabī's *al-kawthar* is where the believers are going to drink on the long hot hours of the Day of Judgment. Thus, the *al-kawthar* is no longer given solely to Muhammad; now the believers have a share in it, while those who have transgressed will be prevented from drinking from its water. The answer given by God to Muhammad in this tradition, that 'he does not know what his followers did after he left them,' is a shorthand reference in ḥadīth literature to the civil wars between the companions of Muhammad.⁷⁹ Thus, *al-kawthar*, the river-abundance of goodness-basin, is a reward for the believers who have not caused the nation (*ummah*) of Muhammad any discord.

Lest the readers have missed this subtle intertextual allusion to civil discord, al-Thaʿlabī brings forth three other ḥadīths that leave no doubt about the salvational message embedded in *al-kawthar*. The first affirms that *al-kawthar* is a basin and then gives a lengthy description of its fantastical dimensions and richness: it is as big as the distance between the east and west, its water is more white than milk, its pebbles of red rubies, etc. The second ḥadīth proclaims that the Muslim nation (*ummah*) will flock to drink from this basin like the flocking of wild asses to water. This ḥadīth clearly proclaims the necessity of drinking from this basin on Judgment Day as a mark of redemption. In the third tradition Muhammad reports that the basin has four corners guarded by each of the four rightly guided caliphs: Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and ʿAlī. Each will guard the basin

⁷⁸ *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, v. 30: 320–325.

⁷⁹ The phrase: *fā-yuqāl innaka lā tadri mā aḥdathu baʿdak*, is originally a motif from *fitnah* (civil war) traditions. Its migration here has the function of tying *al-kawthar* to the salvational motif.

and will prevent any Muslim who hates any of them from drinking of it. The tradition then declares that those who love the four are doing immeasurable good for Islam. The ḥadīth sums up the lesson by stating that whoever speaks well of Muhammad's companions is a believer, and whoever speaks evil of them is a hypocrite.⁸⁰ *Al-kawthar*, which originally was given to Muhammad solely—the suffix *k-* in verse 108:1 leaves no doubt about that—is all of a sudden a basin from which the believers are going to drink; Muhammad is bypassed; *al-kawthar* is first and foremost the water of life for the believers on the Day of Judgment.

Let us note the development of the interpretation of *al-kawthar* from al-Ṭabarī to al-Thaʿlabī. *Al-kawthar*, as interpreted by al-Ṭabarī, has been transformed from an unidentified wealth into a river in paradise or a basin. Yet the river or the basin were still items preserved for Muhammad and the believers were not directly connected to it.⁸¹ In al-Thaʿlabī the transformation is complete. The basin or the river are gifts for the believers.

Indeed *al-kawthar*, a word that denotes abundance, will in the context of sura 108, semantically explode and generate an effusion of meanings. It is as if the word "*al-kawthar*" was indeed a river, but of words and meanings. Al-Thaʿlabī offers no less than fourteen meanings for *al-kawthar*.⁸² *Al-kawthar* is the Qurʾān, prophecy, the Book, and the abundance of companions and followers (of Muhammad); it is altruism, the reading of the Qurʾān, and the ease of the law (in comparison to the stringency of the Jewish law). Some mystic interpretations are also offered by al-Thaʿlabī. *Al-kawthar* is thus a light in the heart that guides the believer to God and secludes the believers from other creatures. *Al-kawthar* is also Muhammad's intercession for his nation.

It was also reported that *al-kawthar* is the miracles of the saints. It is the *shahādah*: the declaration of God's unity and Muhammad's prophethood: There is no God but Allāh and Muhammad is his prophet. Finally, it is the study of the Law, and the five prescribed

⁸⁰ Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kaṣf*, M107, fols. 165(b)–166(a).

⁸¹ Although the beginnings of the transformation are evident in an embryonic form: when Muhammad recounts the fantastic descriptions of his *kawthar*, some of his companions utter words of amazement and envy, to which Muhammad replies: "you should envy those who eat and drink from it," without specifying who is the drinker or the eater.

⁸² Ibid., M107, fols. 165(a)–166(b).

prayers. One wonders if there is anything left in Islam that *al-kawthar* does not refer to. *Al-kawthar* becomes the emblem of salvation, a short hand word for God's love for the community (*ummah*).

Al-kawthar has thus, in the final analysis, become totally detached from Muhammad. What was given was given not to him alone (the *k-* suffix) but to us (the believers). The 'abundance' engulfs all that the Muslims conceived as glorious gifts bestowed on them by God. The process started by al-Tha'labī would be enlarged and completed by later exegetes. Al-Alūsī, for example, gives thirty-five meanings for *al-kawthar*.⁸³

"Thy Lord shall give thee, and thou shalt be satisfied" (*Qur'ān* 93:5)

So far I have examined two examples of al-Tha'labī's salvific reading of the intimate dialogues between God and his messenger. The third example offered here, verse 93:5, will demonstrate how deeply this approach runs in al-Tha'labī's commentary. Once more the language and style of verse 93:5 are neither difficult nor opaque. However, the verse's ambiguous reference (what shall God give Muhammad?) as well as its rhetorical discord with the rest of the *Qur'ān* (where does the reader, a believer, stand in relation to this bestowal of blessings?) were sufficient reasons to guarantee this verse considerable attention from al-Tha'labī. Moreover, sura 93 is one of two examples in the *Qur'ān* where the whole sura is in the second person pronoun addressing Muhammad.⁸⁴ Hence it is also where the salvific interpretation of al-Tha'labī is raised to new heights. For the purpose of contextualizing verse 93:5, I will quote the whole short sura as it is translated by Arberry:

By the white forenoon(1)
and the brooding light!(2)
Thy lord has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee(3)
and the Last shall be better for thee than the First.(4)⁸⁵
Thy Lord shall give thee, and thou shalt be satisfied.(5)

⁸³ To the dismay of Birkeland, see *The Lord Guideth*, 70-74.

⁸⁴ The other is sura 94. It is interesting to note here that there is a strong tendency in the Islamic tradition to see these two chapters as one.

⁸⁵ One could strongly argue that the explanation "a river in paradise" offered by exegetes for *al-kawthar* has its origins here. God in this verse is promising Muhammad an otherworldly reward and *al-kawthar* might have been a reference for such a reward. Thus the *Qur'ān* itself could have instigated the exegetes to give a non-material (i.e. not of this world) explanation.

Did He not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee?(6)
Did He not find thee erring, and guide thee?(7)
Did He not find thee needy, and suffice thee?(8)

As for the orphan, do not oppress him,(9)
and as for the beggar, scold him not;(10)
and as for thy Lord's blessing, declare it.(11)

Muhammad is being reminded here that despite all the impediments that stood in his way, God has been very generous and supporting. The two points emphasized most are Muhammad's economic independence after a life of need, and his new-found faith. A historical reading of verse 5 would thus see in it an affirmation of the blessings bestowed on Muhammad, whether the earthly blessings recounted in verses 6-8, or the eschatological promises of verse 4.

Al-Ṭabarī offers three possible explanations for verse 93:5. "That which was given to Muhammad" could be a reference to the early Islamic conquests, which God the omniscient foretold to Muhammad.⁸⁶ It could also refer to the paradisaical palaces awaiting Muhammad in the next world. Al-Ṭabarī reports that Muhammad was given a thousand palaces made of pearl and with floors of musk. Finally, what was given to Muhammad was a promise that none of his household relatives would enter Hell.⁸⁷

We note, first of all, that none of the interpretations given by al-Ṭabarī carries a salvific message for the believers. Indeed, the third interpretation has a restrictive tone, almost sectarian: the term "household relatives" (*ahl al-Bayt*) smacks of Shi'ite sympathies here. Apparently only Muhammad's close circle of relatives were assured of salvation, to the exclusion of everybody else.

In the century intervening between al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī, however, a marked development has occurred in the interpretation of this verse. After copying al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of this verse *in toto*, al-Tha'labī immediately adds a fourth interpretation with no support from the tradition: it [what was given to Muhammad] is the intercession of Muhammad on behalf of all the believers (my emphasis).⁸⁸ The effrontery of the restrictive interpretations of al-Ṭabarī here demands of al-Tha'labī an immediate corrective retort. What was given to Muhammad is to be shared by all the believers. It is nothing

⁸⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 232.

⁸⁷ Ibid., *min riḍā Muhammad allā yadkhul aḥad min ahlihi al-nār*.

⁸⁸ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 75(b): *wa-qīla hiya al-shafā'ah fi jamī' al-mu'minīn*.

less than the intercession by Muhammad on behalf of his nation. Al-Tha'labī goes on to quote a hadith that relates how Muhammad will intervene on Judgment Day on behalf of his nation (*ummah*) till none of them is in Hell. God will then ask Muhammad if he is "satisfied," a direct reference to the verse in question, to which Muhammad answers "I am satisfied."⁸⁹

It is at this stage that al-Tha'labī breaks the flow of interpretation and offers a dialogue between two authorities about the most hopeful (or merciful, *arḥam*) verse in the Qur'ān.⁹⁰ People of Iraq apparently believed it to be verse 39:53 which runs as follows: "O my people who have been prodigal against yourselves, do not despair of God's mercy; surely God forgives sins altogether; surely He is the All-forgiving." A member of the Prophet's Household (*ahl al-Bayt*), on the other hand, believed it to be verse 93:5. The member of the Prophet's Household, however, offers an explanation of this verse that accords with al-Tha'labī's. What was given to Muhammad was a general intercession on behalf of all the believers (*shafā'ah*). Thus, we have here a member of Muhammad's Household enlarging the salvific import of a verse that apparently was restricted to them by the early exegetical tradition.

Al-Tha'labī then recounts another hadith which introduces a short dramatic depiction of the salvific history of the three monotheistic faiths. Muhammad recounts to himself one day Abraham's prayer for his nation (the Jewish people) as recorded in the Qur'ān (14:36): "Then whoso follows me belongs to me; and whoso rebels against me, surely Thou art All-forgiving, All compassionate." Muhammad likewise remembers Jesus' prayer for his nation as retold in the Qur'ān (5:118), where Jesus says, "If Thou chastisest them they are your servants; if Thou forgivest them, Thou are the All-mighty, the All-wise." Having realized that each prophet has interceded for his nation, Muhammad starts crying and raises his hands in supplication to God on behalf of his nation (*ummatī ummatī*). God then makes inquires as to why Muhammad is crying; upon being told of the reasons He commissions Gabriel to inform Muhammad that God will satisfy him in his nation and will not harm him.⁹¹ The verb 'satisfy' of verse 93:5 is thus directly connected to the word 'nation'—the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., M107, fol. 75(b)–76(a).

⁹¹ Ibid., M107, fol. 76(a): *innā sanurdik fī ummatika wa-lā nasū'uka*.

act of turning the Qur'ān away from Muhammad is complete now.

But since this is al-Tha'labī and the point has to be driven home, he continues to present material in support of his new interpretation until Muhammad is completely displaced from the horizon of this verse. It is reported, al-Tha'labī says, that when this verse was revealed, Muhammad said, almost in a blackmailing tone, that he would not be satisfied as long as even one member of his nation is in hell. Since this hadīth is unsubstantiated—it does not have an *isnād*—al-Tha'labī adduces another one with a full *isnād* that has a very similar text: "Muhammad will not be satisfied if one member of his nation is in Hell."⁹²

Salvific Interpretation and the Mu'tazilī Tradition of Quranic Interpretation

I have already mentioned that al-Tha'labī has refused to grant the Mu'tazilī exegetical tradition of the Qur'ān a recognizable role in his commentary. How could he possibly countenance such a tradition when one of the main corollaries of the tenets of the Mu'tazilī theology was a refusal to accept the notion of Muhammad's intercession (*al-shafā'ah*) on behalf of his nation?⁹³ The intercession of Muhammad, his ability to intercede with God on behalf of the sinners of his community who have not merited paradise, had of course become the symbol of the salvific destiny of the Muslim community (*ummah*) that was at the center of the Sunnite worldview. It is unfortunate that we do not have any complete pre-al-Tha'labī Mu'tazilī commentaries available to compare them with al-Tha'labī's approach. But we do have his successor al-Zamakhsharī, and we should not be surprised to find that he expurgated most of the Sunnī salvific interpretations that had grown around certain verses in the Qur'ān. Although al-Zamakhsharī, in his *al-Kashshāf*, incorporates a substantial amount of al-Tha'labī's commentary, he meticulously omits the salvational explanations I have given as examples so far.⁹⁴

⁹² Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 76(b): *lā yardā Muḥammad wa-wāḥid min ummatih fī al-nār*.

⁹³ It is unfortunate that we do not have a monograph in English on the concept of intercession in medieval Islam. It is even more difficult to find material on the Mu'tazilī views on the matter. See W.M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 138; A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 61. See also the article on *shafā'ah* in *EI*², v. 9: 177–179.

⁹⁴ With few exceptions like verse 53:10; but then al-Zamakhsharī could not clean

Thus when discussing verse 93:5 al-Zamakhsharī never mentions the possibility that God might please Muhammad by saving his nation.⁹⁵ One should bear in mind that the interpretation given by al-Thaʿlabī has become the dominant interpretation of this verse. Even more surprising is that al-Zamakhsharī does not go beyond what al-Ṭabarī has to say about *al-kawthar* in verse 108:1.⁹⁶ In neither case is he willing to grant the verses any meaning that supports a traditional understanding of how salvation works in Sunnī theology.

Al-Zamakhsharī, however, was waging a losing battle; the impetus of the exegetical exercise was such that even he could not avoid incorporating a Sunnī understanding of intercession. Indeed, in his work he accepts the notion of intercession, though he tries to nullify it by making it operative only if it satisfies two conditions (*shartayn*).⁹⁷ The first is that the beneficiary of an intercession (*al-mashfūʿ lahu*) has to be worthy (*murtaḍan*) and the intercessor has to be given permission to intercede (*maʾdhūn lahu*). In his commentary on verse 40:18 he clarifies what he means by the above by stating that one had to have repented to become eligible for intercession.⁹⁸ But al-Zamakhsharī never explains why one needs intercession at all, since in any case God forgives a true repentant, something nobody denies. I can only see here a concession on the part of the Muʿtazilah to a term but not to its efficacy.⁹⁹ However, this in itself is a complete concession. The mere allowance of a term gives the term a potency that no redefinition can efface. For when al-Zamakhsharī comes to verse 17:79, which contains the famous phrase “honorable station” (*maqām maḥmūd*)—a rank or privilege given to Muhammad that was understood to mean his intercession—he adduces the Sunnī interpretation that understands this verse to mean Muhammad’s intercession on behalf of the believers.¹⁰⁰ He does try to mitigate the impact of this interpretation

up all the Sunnī exegetical tradition from what was most characteristic of it. It is these oddly placed textual marks in al-Zamakhsharī’s work that is the proof of his dependence on al-Thaʿlabī. On this dependency see Chapter Seven.

⁹⁵ *Al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 219.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, v. 4: 237.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, v. 3: 349.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, v. 3: 365; cf. also v. 3: 9 where he repeats the same conditions (commenting on verse 21:28).

⁹⁹ The term was quranic and hence hard to disregard.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, v. 2: 372. Al-Zamakhsharī is clearly not happy with this understanding of the meaning of the verse and relegates it to the status of mere probability. It is not clear why al-Zamakhsharī is willing to reproduce this meaning for the term here.

by stating that it is one of the probable meanings of the term. The term, al-Zamakhsharī claims, should be understood to refer to Muhammad’s excellent qualities as a whole.¹⁰¹ All the same, Muhammad does intercede.

In many ways, al-Zamakhsharī’s acceptance by Sunnī schools was predicated on a tacit realization that his Muʿtazilī views were such that they did not override the nature of his heavily Sunnī commentary, which was primarily dependent on an orthodox exegetical tradition.¹⁰² The incisive Ibn Taymīyah has another explanation for the perplexing acceptance of the Sunnī scholars of al-Zamakhsharī’s commentary. He claims that al-Zamakhsharī was too good a writer (*ḥasan al-ibārah*), too eloquent a stylist (*faṣīḥan*) who managed to insinuate his heretical doctrines (*yaduss al-bidaʿ*) into his writings without people noticing (*wa-akthar al-nās lā yaʿlamūn*).¹⁰³ Indeed, Ibn Taymīyah has seen exegetes (*al-ʿulamāʾ al-mufasssīrīn*) quote al-Zamakhsharī expounding his unholy doctrines without realizing that they are quoting something they do not agree with or believe in. This might be the case, but because Ibn Taymīyah was too patronizing a scholar, it is difficult to take his remarks at face value.

It is only by a close, attentive reading of the exegetical tradition that we modern readers are able to understand the method of the Muslim exegetes. At first glance the hundreds of commentaries we have from medieval times leave us with the distinct impression that this tradition has no guiding principle, that it is a jungle of quotations where what was left unquoted by some is quoted by another. Or at least it seems beyond our ken to comprehend the minute reasons that made an exegete like al-Zamakhsharī, for example, copy al-Thaʿlabī’s interpretation, *in toto* in one verse and in another select and omit what we consider to be al-Thaʿlabī’s main interpretation. Only a comparative analytical approach enables us to fully appreciate the complexity of this tradition, its remarkable development and marked variation from one exegete to another.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, v. 2: 372: *wa-huwa muṭlaq fī kull mā yaḥib al-ḥamd min anwāʾ al-karāmāt*.

¹⁰² Thus we are more likely to find citations of early Muʿtazilī commentaries in someone like al-Rāzī and not al-Zamakhsharī.

¹⁰³ Ibn Taymīyah, *Muqaddimah fī al-tafsīr* (Cairo, 1965), 38.

C. Philology and Exegesis

Writing in the middle of the fourth/tenth century the lexicographer al-Azharī (d. 370/980) articulated one of the most influential medieval presentations on the relationship between the study of Arabic language and exegesis. In the introduction to his foundational lexicon *Tahdhīb al-lughah*, he firmly asserts the subordination of the science of lexicography to the aims of quranic exegesis.¹⁰⁴ Only the first generation of Muslims, he informs us, was not in need of studying Arabic; everyone who follows must "exert an effort to learn that which allows the knowledge of the discourse of the Qur'ān" in order for his understanding to be free from blemish and heresy.¹⁰⁵ He viewed philology as a prerequisite for the study of exegesis. Indeed, heresy was seen as the direct result of a defective understanding of the working of Arabic, and as such philology held the promise of reunifying the Muslim community.

By the middle of the fourth/tenth century philology had matured into a full-fledged discipline in the Arabo-Islamic lands and study of Arabic grammar, rhetoric, and lexicography reached its peak. Philology was the reigning mode of discourse in literary studies which was mainly concerned with pre-Islamic poetry and its interpretation, and quranic exegesis was bound to come under its influence. The schools that were producing the likes of al-Tha'ālibī the man of literature were at the same time producing al-Tha'labī the exegete. Great philologists and men of literature were equally great exegetes; al-Wāḥidī is an example. The task of the exegete in the wake of this infusion of philology became more difficult, since many of the traditional interpretations proved to be either philologically unfounded or, more often than not, doctrinal in origin. One had as a consequence either to jettison all the inherited interpretations or else devise new conciliatory techniques in order to accommodate the exegetical tradition to the rigors of new philological sensibility.

I am not disputing the fact that philological tools were at the disposal of exegetes before the middle of the fourth century. On the contrary, the philological school of quranic studies both in the form

¹⁰⁴ Al-Azharī, *Tahdhīb al-lughah*, 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn, ed. (Cairo, 1964), v. 1: 3–7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., v. 1: 4: *fa-'alaynā an najtahid fī ta'allum mā yutawassal bi-ta'allumih ilā ma'rifat ḍurūb khitāb al-kitāb. . . li-tantafti 'annā al-shubhah al-dākhilah 'alā kathīr min ri'asā' ahl al-zaygh wa-al-ilhād.*

of books of *ma'ānī* or *majāz* and *gharīb* has a long, illustrious history. Indeed, it was the study of the Qur'ān that prompted the creation of the science of grammar in the first place.¹⁰⁶ But quranic interpretation was too important an element in the formation of the new world-view of the Islamic religion to be allowed to fall under the monopoly of the philological method, which would have imposed serious limitations on the exegetes. The nascent Islamic identity was too fragile not to use all the other means available to 'explain' the Qur'ān in a fashion that was ideologically consistent and that resulted in a harmonious reading of the text. In the long run the more philologically oriented works on the Qur'ān (*ma'ānī*, *majāz* and *gharīb*) were never viewed as essentially exegetical. They somehow hovered on the margins.¹⁰⁷ And when these works were incorporated into the mainstream of the exegetical tradition, for example as in al-Ṭabarī, they did not alter the mode of interpretation; they simply added another way of doing things.¹⁰⁸ But by the mid-fourth century the intellectual atmosphere had changed. Exegesis could not afford to appear to be different from philology; the manner in which a philologist explained pre-Islamic odes came to be replicated by exegetes when explaining the Qur'ān.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, no self-respecting exegete would think of proceeding except in accordance with the most stringent of philological rules; or, at the very least he must appear to be doing so. The challenge was to look like a philologist and still do exegesis the way it had traditionally been done for three hundred

¹⁰⁶ C.H.M. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Quranic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993).

¹⁰⁷ Notice the dead-end fates these kinds of literature suffered; they never thrived as genres. The *ma'ānī* and *majāz* works were incorporated into exegetical works proper, while *gharīb* works were incorporated into lexicographic works.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Heath in his article "Creative Hermeneutics: A Comparative Analysis of Three Islamic Approaches," asserts that "At-Ṭabarī's approach to Qur'ānic exegesis is essentially philological" *Arabica* 36, 1989, 181, a statement that is hard to sustain in light of what we know of al-Ṭabarī's approach. The pioneering works of Claude Gilliot on *tafsīr* in general and on al-Ṭabarī in particular have totally disabused us of the notion of "philologically" neutral exegesis. *Tafsīr* is one of the primary fields in which the nascent Islamic orthodoxy proclaimed its views and tenets. Nothing is innocent about a field that was ultimately engaged in explaining the very word that was being disputed, the Qur'ān itself. See his *Exégèse, langue, et théologie en Islam: L'exégèse coranique de Tabarī (d. 311/923)* (Paris, 1990); idem, "Langue et Coran selon Tabarī," *Studia Islamica* 68 (1988): 79–106; idem, "Mythe, récit, histoire du salut dans le commentaire coranique de Tabarī," *Journal Asiatique* 282 (1994): 237–70.

¹⁰⁹ The similarity between the two enterprises is in dire need of investigation, one example that comes to mind here is the occasion of a poem and the occasion of revelation. Many other similar approaches characterized the two disciplines.

years.¹¹⁰ Because of the inherent conflict between two equally necessary methods of exegesis, a search for a solution became an imperative.

What was the reaction of al-Tha'labī to this new situation? One finds a twofold response. On the one hand he allowed philology an uncontested authority over the meaning of certain quranic verses. As a consequence, their traditional interpretation was, if not fully rejected, at least seriously called into question. On the other hand, he used pseudo-philological techniques (to al-Tha'labī of course they were not pseudo-philological) to justify old non-philological interpretations or advance new interpretations that smoothed over a doctrinally embarrassing verse. Yet in both cases al-Tha'labī looked as if he were following the rules of philology, and that the basis of his work was rooted in a sound philological approach.

Before giving examples of these two methods I want to show how the philological model colored and modified the interpretive enterprise and set the tone for al-Tha'labī's work. Take for example the already discussed word "*al-kawthar*" (abundance) in verse 108:1. When al-Ṭabarī gave his three interpretations he did not bother to explain the strange morphology of the word—a hapax legomenon, after all—nor did he offer the lexicographic meaning of the word. It was not that he did not know how to do that, but he saw no point in mentioning a philological interpretation that had no bearing on the traditional ones he was going to offer.¹¹¹ On the other hand al-Tha'labī started his interpretation with a full morphological analysis of the word, its lexicographic meaning, and a colorful philological story from linguistic informants about how the Bedouin Arabs used the word.¹¹² The premise in such an approach is that knowing the original meaning of the word and how the Arabs used it will make it easier to know its meaning, or should at least be the basis of our understanding of its quranic usage.¹¹³ To see how dependent al-Tha'labī is on the lexicographic tools we need to look at al-Azharī's dictionary under the root *k-th-r*.¹¹⁴ There al-Azharī discusses the word

¹¹⁰ It is also important to note here that the influence was mutual: lexicography was heavily influenced by religiously motivated interpretations. Fortunately, this side of the phenomenon has been investigated by Lothar Kopf. See his "Religious Influences on Medieval Arabic Philology," *Studia Islamica* 5 (1956): 33–59.

¹¹¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 320.

¹¹² Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 164(b).

¹¹³ Needless to say al-Tha'labī does not base his understanding of *al-kawthar* on its lexicographic meaning only. Tradition determined it, but the semblance of objective philological approach is all the same there.

¹¹⁴ Al-Azharī, *Tahdhīb*, v. 10: 176–179.

kawthar, giving exactly the same information as al-Tha'labī.¹¹⁵ Even the linguistic anecdote, although in a different version, is there.¹¹⁶ From this and hundreds of other examples, one could easily surmise that al-Tha'labī was not only aware of what lexicographers were advancing as meanings for quranic words, but systematically incorporated their findings in his commentary.¹¹⁷

It is not that al-Ṭabarī did not use philology; he certainly did, but not consistently. Al-Tha'labī, on the other hand, appears to be consistent in incorporating philological material into the fabric of his interpretive work. Another example is verse 79:34, in which the word *ṭāmmah* (great catastrophe) appears. Al-Ṭabarī is content to explain the word and what it means lexicographically without further information about the etymology of the word.¹¹⁸ Al-Tha'labī, after quoting the exact words of al-Ṭabarī, adds what the word signified for pre-Islamic Arabs [i.e. Bedouins] and its etymology.¹¹⁹ In many instances al-Ṭabarī has nothing to say about a word, while al-Tha'labī supplies not only an explanation, but poetic attestation of its use by the pre-Islamic poets.¹²⁰ In other instances al-Tha'labī is not shy to point out the foreign origins of a word, which al-Ṭabarī fails to mention.¹²¹ Furthermore, al-Tha'labī is consistent in his citation of variant readings, almost to the level of exhaustive treatment of this topic, something al-Ṭabarī does not do consistently.¹²²

A final corollary of al-Tha'labī's philological meticulousness is the abundance of poetical citation in his work. Indeed, the number of linguistically-oriented poetic citations in this commentary is staggering.¹²³ In all these instances al-Tha'labī shows a keen awareness of

¹¹⁵ Ibid., v. 10: 177.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., v. 10: 178.

¹¹⁷ There is no doubt that al-Tha'labī had read *Tahdhīb al-lughah*. The author of this lexicon was a fellow Nishapurian, after all.

¹¹⁸ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 47.

¹¹⁹ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 38(a).

¹²⁰ See al-Tha'labī's comment on verse 80:6, the word in question is *ṭaṣaddā*, ibid., M107, fol. 32(b).

¹²¹ Ibid., M107, fol. 39(a), where the word *safr* for book is correctly related to Hebrew.

¹²² As one example see al-Tha'labī's comment on verse 80:37, where after a full philological discussion of the word *ruḥnīh*, he supplies a variant reading and declares it to be (*shādhḥah*), ibid., M107, fol. 41(b). Al-Ṭabarī meanwhile fails to mention either a philological explanation or the variant reading. See *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 61–62.

¹²³ The cumbersome expression "linguistically oriented poetic citation" is my rendering of the Arabic '*shawāhid*'. It should be also kept in mind that al-Tha'labī has a penchant for poetry in general, and many non-linguistic poems are quoted in the course of his commentary. See below on this phenomenon.

the lexicographical activities of his fellow scholars, most notably al-Azharī. The consistent use of philological method by al-Tha'labī shows to what degree he was determined to lift the level of exegesis to that of pre-Islamic poetry.

The examples from al-Tha'labī that I have adduced so far are instances where there was no doctrinal clash between the received traditional interpretation and the philological exercise. As long as the philological reading did not entail any ideological difficulties, it was more than welcomed and placed side by side with the traditional interpretation. It was in doctrinally sensitive loci, in which a plain philological reading would have resulted in an abhorrent doctrinal conundrum, that we witness a shift to pseudo-philological approaches. On the other hand, there were instances where a cherished traditional interpretation was seriously undermined because on closer scrutiny it did not make any philological sense, yet adopting the new interpretation did not entail readjustment of any doctrinal views.

First I would like to give an example of the instances where the infusion of philological methods undermined long-established traditional interpretations without causing theological difficulties. One such example is al-Tha'labī's commentary on verses 94:5–6, "So truly with *the* hardship comes ease (5), truly with *the* hardship comes ease (6)" (my emphasis, see below). Al-Tha'labī starts by commenting on verse 94:5 by quoting al-Ṭabarī's interpretation for this verse.¹²⁴ God, al-Tha'labī says, is promising ease to Muhammad despite the hardship he has been enduring with his fight against the unbelievers. The "ease" will be in the form of both a victory and either conversion or submission of the unbelievers. Here ends the first section of the quotation from al-Ṭabarī. Verse 94:6, which is a word for word repetition of the previous verse, is repeated, according to al-Tha'labī, to emphasize the threat (to the unbelievers) and affirm the promise of success to Muhammad. This view was not advanced by al-Ṭabarī, and represents the soundest possible philological interpretation: where there is repetition in Arabic discourse it is usually done for emphasis.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ For al-Ṭabarī's interpretation see his *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 235–236. For al-Tha'labī's see *al-Kaṣf*, M107, fols. 82(b)–85(a).

¹²⁵ In his commentary on sura 109, a sura based on repetition, al-Tha'labī offers the fullest articulation of his views on the role of repetition in Arabic language. I offer here a translation of the paragraph: "A majority of the people of rhetoric (*ahl al-ma'ānī*) is of the opinion that the Qur'ān was revealed in the language of the Arabs and according to their linguistic habits of discourse (*khiṭāb*). One of their

The traditional interpretation, however, had already developed into an intricate construction in which the salvational impulse used these verses as a reassurance for the believers and an example of God's benevolence. This interpretation is then offered by al-Tha'labī immediately after his short philological exposé of the function of repetitions in Arabic. It is important to note that it was also an interpretation offered earlier by al-Ṭabarī. The interpretation is in a form of a hadith that relates that when this sura was revealed, Muhammad said to his companions, "Good tidings! ease has arrived, one hardship could not overcome two eases" (*lan yaghlib 'usr yusrayn*).¹²⁶ While al-Ṭabarī stopped here and did not elaborate in what way this hadith is an interpretation for these verses, al-Tha'labī takes the interpretive exercise a step further.

Al-Tha'labī feels compelled to articulate the relationship between the verses "So truly with *the* hardship comes ease (5), truly with *the* hardship comes ease (6)" and Muhammad's statement "one hardship could not overcome two eases." Al-Ṭabarī's quotation of the hadith, and likewise al-Tha'labī's, imply that the hadith is an interpretation of these two verses. But in what way is this statement an interpretation for the verses? Al-Tha'labī quotes anonymous scholars (*'ulamā'*) who advanced the view that since the word "hardship" in verses 94:5–6 was definite and the word "ease" in the same verses was indefinite, then we have here one "hardship" and two "eases". How? According to the linguistic habits of the Arabs (*min 'ādat al-'Arab*), so goes the claim of these scholars, when a definite noun is repeated the repetition is referring to the same noun (i.e. we only have one item) while if a noun is indefinite and is repeated, the repeated indefinite name is another entity (thus two of the same thing).¹²⁷ One hardship of course will not be able to defeat two "eases". Here we have a pseudo-philological interpretation offered as a justification for a traditional salvific explanation. Notice that the scholars are anonymous, and the reference to the Arabs has no informants, or a grammarian for that matter, to support it.

habits is repetition of words in order to emphasis and elucidate—just as brevity is one of their habits for a more streamlined prose." Al-Tha'labī then gives a catalogue of the instances of repetitions in the Qur'ān; verses 94:5–6 are listed, *al-Kaṣf*, M107, fols. 170(b)–171(a).

¹²⁶ Ibid., M107, fol. 83(a).

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Al-Tha'labī then starts another quotation, an extensive one, from a certain al-Ḥasan b. Yaḥyā b. Naṣr al-Jurjānī, the author of the *Kitāb al-Naẓm* (Book of Composition) regarding this matter. In this quotation al-Jurjānī debunks the above cherished interpretation of verses 94:5–6 with its “two eases” and one hardship, mocking the pseudo-philological rationale, and offers a different reading of the two verses; he also offers an explanation of what Muhammad meant by “one hardship and two eases.” Below is a complete translation of the quotation, which shows to what degree philological sophistication has penetrated the exegetical enterprise:

“People have explained the meaning of the Prophet’s statement: ‘one hardship cannot overcome two eases’ and they could only come up with the (flimsy) explanation that hardship [in verses 94:5–6] is definite while ease is indefinite, and thus the statement could be only referring to one hardship and two eases. This is a fallacious statement because when one states in Arabic: ‘The knight has a sword, the knight has a sword’ one is not referring to one knight and two swords! *This is not how Arabic syntax works (wa-lā yaṣīḥh dhālika fī naẓm al-‘Arabīyah)*. The meaning of “one hardship could not overcome two eases” is that Muhammad was a prophet with few possessions and no wealth and was taunted by the unbelievers for his poverty; and they said to him mockingly that they would give him money.¹²⁸ Muhammad, agonized by self-doubt, thought that the unbelievers would not trust him because of his poverty. God then consoled him and recounted the blessings He had conferred on him and then promised him wealth and thus the sura (94:1–4) where God says to Muhammad: ‘Have We not lifted up your heart and relieved you of the burden’ . . . ‘renown’—and these are the verses where God mentions his blessings. Then God continued (sura 94) and made clear his promise of wealth in order to lift Mohammed’s morale and said, ‘So truly with the hardship comes ease’ (verse 5). That this verse is related to what comes before it is clear from the *fā’* (so) which is a particle that is used to connect two statements. Thus the meaning of this verse is: do not be sad over what they say because (*fa-*) with hardship comes ease in this world. God has kept his promise and given Muhammad all of Arabia and he became a rich man so much so that he could give away 200 camels at once. Then God in verse 94:6 starts to mention another kind of blessing, a blessing that belongs to the world to come. The proof that we have here a different topic (despite the fact that the wording is the same) is that this verse (94:6) does not start with any particle of conjunction. Thus this verse is a general promise to all the believers [unlike the previous one which was only confined to Muhammad]. Thus it

¹²⁸ The implication here is that Muhammad was a man who wanted money and prophecy was his way to get rich.

means that the believers have ease with hardship in this world and ease only in the coming world. Thus Muhammad’s statement ‘one hardship could not overcome two eases’ means that the hardship of this world will not overcome the ease which God has promised the believers in this world and the ease of the coming world. Only the ease of this world will be conquered by hardship but not the ease of the coming world, since that is eternal and unchanging.”¹²⁹

In this quotation we encounter the second opinion current among philologically-minded exegetes regarding the two verses. They are not a true repetition (because of the particle ‘so’). If this is not a repetition then each statement must be referring to something different. Al-Jurjānī then informs the reader of the reference of each verse, and offers a different explanation of the prophetic hadith.

As we can see from this quotation, quranic exegesis could no longer make facile philological claims without being challenged. Arabic had by then been extensively studied, and philologists know (even if they never fully agree) how it works. Any interpretation that rests on convoluted polemical arguments must from now on contend with a sharp critical eye.¹³⁰ Al-Tha’labī has also, by opening the door to such lengthy linguistic arguments, created a trend in quranic exegesis that would later become widespread. Many Qur’ān commentaries after al-Tha’labī would read increasingly like grammatical treatises.

Now I would like to give examples of the instances where pseudo-philology was used to advance interpretations that smoothed over doctrinally embarrassing verses. Perhaps there is no more troubling sura in the Qur’ān than sura 93. Its very wording and tone jar the ear of a Muslim grown accustomed to perceive Muhammad as the center of God’s plan for the universe. Muhammad, who, according to the by-then widespread dogma, was from the very day of his conception a perfect man, is portrayed in sura 93 in most human and humble of terms. To read sura 93 and be bluntly reminded of Muhammad’s humble origins, his poverty, and, most importantly, his pagan past, is beyond what any medieval Muslim, who believed in the infallibility of Muhammad, would care to admit.¹³¹ Exegesis

¹²⁹ Ibid., M107, fol. 83(a)–83(b). This was not the end of the interpretive exercise of al-Tha’labī on these verses. He will offer a long digressive section on hope and despair. I will have occasion to come back to these verses later in this chapter.

¹³⁰ Of course the exegetes as guardians of what could and could not be admitted into the interpretative tradition acted as filters for excessive philological intrusions.

¹³¹ Even a literalist like al-Zamakhsharī is beside himself when he recounts literal rendering of the meaning of these verses. Muhammad is blemishless, and that is that, he declares. See below for more.

was thus used to mitigate the impact of the quranic language. I will give verses 6–11 of sura 93 before discussing al-Tha'labī's interpretation of certain key words:

Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter?(6)
 Did He not find you erring and guide you?(7)
 Did He not find you poor and enrich you?(8)
 Therefore do not wrong the orphan,(9) nor chide away the beggar.(10)
 But proclaim the goodness of your Lord.(11)

The unflattering epithets (orphan, erring, and poor) are masterfully explained away by al-Tha'labī through the use of pseudo-philological methods that allow him to introduce diametrically opposite meanings for these words.

Let us look at how he explains the word "orphan" (*yatīm*) in verse 93:6. While al-Ṭabarī saw nothing arresting about this word—it did not even warrant a gloss—al-Tha'labī offers a rather lengthy commentary.¹³² First al-Tha'labī explains "orphan" to mean "young and poor with parents dead and without inheritance and shelter."¹³³ So far the philology is standard and straightforward, if a bit dramatic. But why would God make His most beloved creature an orphan? Why would He inflict on him what was considered the most miserable fate a child could endure? These theodothical questions, though never explicitly asked, were apparently lurking in the mind of al-Tha'labī, for he offers a tradition in which Ja'far al-Ṣādiq elaborates the theological reason for Muhammad's orphanage: Muhammad was made into an orphan because God did not want him to be indebted to any creature.¹³⁴ Al-Tha'labī offers then another interpretation for "orphan," an interpretation that is based on the authority of his teacher Ibn Ḥabīb. Orphan means in this verse "unique in nobility (*sharaf*) and excellence (*faḍl*) with no match."¹³⁵ This interpretation for the word "orphan" is based, according to Ibn Ḥabīb, on the Arabs' use of the word "orphan" in phrases like "an orphan jewel" (*durrah yatīmah*), a phrase used to describe outstanding gems.¹³⁶ Then

¹³² For al-Ṭabarī see his *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 232; *al-Kashf*, M107, fols. 76(a)–76(b), for al-Tha'labī's commentary.

¹³³ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 76(b).

¹³⁴ Ibid., M107, fol. 77(a): *li'allā yakūn 'alayhi ḥaqqun li-makhlūq*. It is this sensitivity to the implications of the quranic text that makes al-Tha'labī's commentary a real departure from the usual way of doing exegesis.

¹³⁵ Ibid., M107, fol. 77(a).

¹³⁶ Ibid.

al-Tha'labī proceeds to quote a line of poetry to support this reading. It is clear that al-Tha'labī is advancing a philologically unsound reading, using the trappings of the philological methods ("according to the Arabs," *wa-huwa min qawl al-'arab*) and then quoting poetry, just as a philologist would do to vindicate his explanation. The result is a complete reversal of the meaning of "orphan;" it is no longer a reference to Muhammad's humble origins but to his uniqueness. Al-Zamakhsharī, who as a Mu'tazilite was more at ease with Muhammad's humble origins—it simply did not negate his infallibility—was beside himself over this explanation. He singles it out for ridicule, calling it fanciful.¹³⁷

Likewise in his treatment of the word "erring" (*dāllan*) in verse 93:7, al-Tha'labī advances an interpretation that would transform the meaning of "erring" to its opposite: "guided." For according to the linguistic habits of the Arabs, a lonely tree in the middle of the desert is called "erring" (*dāllah*) because lost people use it as a guidepost.¹³⁸ Thus the verse "He found you erring" means "He found you alone without any other prophet and the Arabs were guided by you to God." This remarkable interpretation literally turns the meaning of "*dāllan*" to its very opposite; it is advanced in the garb of the philological method by borrowing its magical phrase, "according to the linguistic habits of the Arabs."

Finally, the infusion of philology into the commentary of al-Tha'labī would also result in the inclusion of non-interpretive linguistic data that have no direct relationship with Qur'ān interpretation apart from pure literary association. These data appear in the form of digressive sections of poetry, aphorisms or listings of words. The model for such sections is of course the literary encyclopedic tradition (*adab* works). In the first example I am adducing al-Tha'labī offers a large selection of aphorisms and poetic selections on the pen and its uses. This section comes after the interpretation of verse 68:1, where God swears by the pen; the word pen acts as a catalyst for the literary digression. This literary section, which cuts the usual flow of interpretation, functions as an intellectual resting place for the

¹³⁷ *Al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 220: *wa-min bida' al-tafāsīr annahu min qawlihim durrah yatīmah*, a direct reference to al-Tha'labī, without naming him.

¹³⁸ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 79(a): *qāl ba'd ahl al-kalām inna al-'Arab idhā wajadat shajarah fī falātin min al-ard' waḥīdah laysa ma'ahā thānīyah yusammūnahā dāllah fa-yahtadūn bi-hā al-tariq. fa-qāl wajadaka dāllan laysa ma'aka nabī ghayraka fa-hadayt bi-ka al-khalq ilayya*.

reader. The practice of digression was highly valued in literary works, in which dwelling on one topic to the complete exclusion of others was deemed a source of boredom. Thus different topics were mixed or the flow of writing was interrupted to allow for some digressive remarks. *Tafsīr* with its set course of verse-by-verse commentary was inhospitable to such a practice. But the main reason that *tafsīr* never adopted this method before was that the targeted audience was a captive audience. Those who were willing to read *tafsīr* did so out of religious motivation and as such were not prone to boredom (or at least one could not admit that one was bored reading scripture and its exegesis). Conversely, authors of *tafsīr* before al-Tha'labī were never reader-friendly in their approach. Al-Tha'labī, as I have already shown, is determined to change the equation. Although he has already made clear his intention to digress in the introduction to his commentary, he feels obliged to repeat the justification, stating that since the sages and poets have discoursed lengthily on the topic of the pen he deems it proper to include the material in his book.¹³⁹

The second example of al-Tha'labī's inclusion of pure linguistic data is an exhaustive list of the names of the different stages of human life, a piece that is more fitting in a work of lexicography than in a *tafsīr*.¹⁴⁰ After commenting on verse 81:19, al-Tha'labī adds that the sages (*al-ḥukamā'*) have divided human life into thirty-seven stages, which he proceeds to name. The infusion of philology into quranic exegesis created a dynamic interplay between the traditional interpretive method and the philological method. The latter needed validation from the former; yet the former was only allowed to speak when it was innocuous to established theological doctrines. Since theological thinking was always changing, philological insights into the Qur'ān were thus always possible.

D. The Anthological Nature of al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān Commentary

I would like to discuss another characteristic of al-Tha'labī's approach which I would have discussed at the very beginning were it not for my desire to give the reader the chance to experience some samples

¹³⁹ Ibid., M106, fol. 161(a-b): *wa-qad akthara al-ḥukamā' wa-al-bulaghā' fī wasf al-qalam wa-naḥ'ihī wa-lam urid ikhlā' hādihī al-kitāb 'an nubadh min fusūṣih.*

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., M107, fol. 61(a).

of this literature before moving on to characterize its most fundamental aspect. Muslim exegetical tradition is primarily anthological in nature.¹⁴¹ Thus, a classical Qur'ān commentary is usually made up of citations of the interpretations of earlier exegetes, with the compiler either adding his own interpretation or commenting on the old, or adjudicating between them. Al-Ṭabarī, who started the trend, devised it, I believe, under the influence of the consensus doctrine (*ijmā'*) that had become central to the Sunnī worldview. The course he set proved lasting even to this day.

However, since the whole exegetical tradition could be fairly characterized as anthological, the challenge is to qualify in which way one exegete's anthological practice is different from the others.¹⁴² While extensive research needs to be done on each individual commentator before we are able to issue any general assessment, it would not be too far off the mark to note that al-Tha'labī exemplifies a unique moment in this tradition, a moment when both an exhaustive anthological spirit was too unbridled to be controlled, and the encyclopedic spirit too widespread in the general culture to leave exegesis any option but to be all-embracing. Thus, despite the varied impulses that were pulling al-Tha'labī in different directions, he managed to contain in his commentary a volume of traditions and opinions never found in one work before and never to be found in their totality again in subsequent works. His greatest achievement was in being exhaustive while preserving a unity to the work that reflected his singular hermeneutical voice.

Al-Tha'labī also allows contradictory interpretations to coexist without upsetting the balance in favor of one or another, thus treating

¹⁴¹ I owe this nomenclature to Steven Fraade, who applies it to midrash literature. See his *From Tradition to Commentary* (New York: State University of New York, 1991), 15–16. I prefer this term to Norman Calder's lengthy phrase (see next note), which mixes different features under one rubric. *Tafsīr* is, as Calder stated, polyvalent and anthological, and it depends on authorities. However, each of these features, though related, is independent and should be treated separately.

¹⁴² The pioneering article of Norman Calder on the genre of *tafsīr* remains unparalleled to this date. The mistakes in the generalizations found in the article are due to the lack of availability of samples of *tafsīr* literature from all the crucial periods and not due to any shortcomings on Calder's part. He was the first to characterize *tafsīr* as a literature of citations: "This citation of named authorities and the consequent polyvalent reading of the text is the second structural characteristic of *tafsīr* which I propose as constitutive of the genre." See his "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 103.

the tradition with a keen sense of reserve and respect. Indeed, the sedimentation that his approach allowed is remarkable: one can look at the interpretation of any verse and see preserved there a complete history of the Sunnī interpretive tradition and its approach to the Qur'ān from the earliest period to the author's time. As an example I will stay with the verse 93:7 (Did He not find you erring and guide you?) just discussed above, and go over al-Tha'labī's complete interpretation of this verse. To accentuate the innovations introduced by al-Tha'labī I will first offer the commentary of al-Ṭabarī on this verse.

Al-Ṭabarī offers three different interpretations. The first is a paraphrase: He (God) found you in a state that is different from the state which you are in now.¹⁴³ This is of course a guarded and incomplete paraphrasing, for it hides more than it reveals; "a state that is different from the state which you are in now" could only be paganism, but there are facts that are better left unsaid, and the alert reader would undoubtedly get the point. Al-Ṭabarī is clearly of the opinion that Muhammad was a pagan before being called to Islam. It is not clear how he reconciled this view with the established doctrine of the prophet's infallibility.¹⁴⁴ He resorts here to caution and allusion, both being the safest way. The second interpretation comes from al-Suddī who states that until he was forty, Muhammad was a follower of the affairs (*amr*) of his tribe, *kāna 'alā amr qawmihi arba'ina sannah*.¹⁴⁵ This is the closest that the interpretive tradition would come to admitting Muhammad's pagan past. The last interpretation is an anonymous quotation that states that the verse meant that Muhammad was living among an unguided people and was guided to God.¹⁴⁶ Here we encounter the first interpretation in the tradition that attempts to deflect the meaning of the verse away from Muhammad's pagan past and focus the attention on his tribe. There is no further comment from al-Ṭabarī and he stops short of giving his explicit preference, as is his usual custom. Yet, the first two interpretations make it clear what al-Ṭabarī thinks about the meaning of the verse. It is

¹⁴³ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 232: *wa-wajadaka 'alā ghayr alladhī anta 'alayhi al-yawm*.

¹⁴⁴ The doctrine held that prophets even before their call to prophecy were infallible, which includes them being eternally monotheists. They might not be aware of revelation or divine law, but that was always a detail in the Islamic salvational paradigm. What is most important is *tawhīd*, a belief in one almighty God. Anyone who believes in one God is, by virtue of that belief, a Muslim.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., v. 30: 232. Note the scrupulous avoidance of the word religion, *dīn*.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., *wa-wajadaka fī qawm ḡullāl ja-hadāka*.

important to note here that the total number of words that al-Ṭabarī dedicated to the interpretation of verse 93:7 is 18.

Al-Tha'labī's interpretation is not only more substantial but has preserved a wider variety of exegetical material that stems from different trends in the tradition. In all there are at least 20 different interpretations, with one running into a full page. As usual, al-Tha'labī starts with the same interpretations which have been already adduced by al-Ṭabarī. Al-Tha'labī then quotes an anonymous exegete who interprets the verse to mean that God guided the unbelievers through Muhammad.

The fifth interpretation is based on the authority of several leading early commentators: al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Ḍaḥḥāk, Shahr b. Ḥawshab, and Ibn Kaysān. According to this interpretation Muhammad, who was "unguided to the signposts of prophecy and unaware of the rules of the Shari'ah (divine law)" was guided and turned into a prophet and a lawgiver. This is a brilliant compromise, for while it affirms that Muhammad could not possibly have been a prophet before he was called to prophecy, or a legislator before ordered to dispense laws, it is silent about the possibility that Muhammad was a *mushrik*, a pagan, someone who did not recognize God as the sole deity. The interpretation appears to grant the verse its full impact, but in reality the verse is declawed. This interpretation is then supported by al-Tha'labī's adducing two other quranic verses (12:3 and 42:52), both of which could be easily construed to affirm Muhammad's early paganism.¹⁴⁷ Yet al-Tha'labī provides them as a support for the interpretation and not as problematic verses that need elucidation.¹⁴⁸ This is a brilliant maneuver, for by bringing together all the troubling verses that hint at Muhammad's early paganism, al-Tha'labī is able to nullify their effect collectively.

As we can see, al-Tha'labī's interpretations of 93:7 are moving in one direction: neutralizing the impact of the verse. Yet this is done not by dropping the earlier interpretations that stand in opposition to the newly advanced views, but by layering the new on top of the old. Thus, despite the growing trend in the tradition to cushion the impact of the verse, the troubling early layers of interpretation are

¹⁴⁷ Verse 12:3 reads: "though before it (the Qur'ān) thou wast one of the heedless (*al-ghāfilīn*)," 42:52 reads: "Thou knewest not what the Book was, nor belief."

¹⁴⁸ Al-Tha'labī's interpretation of verse 12:3 does not betray any theological discomfort; see *al-Kashf*, M103, fol. 61(b). The matter is different with 42:52, where the word belief has to be explained away, see *ibid.*, M105 fol. 77(a).

preserved intact. Moreover, there are no editorial refutations of these early interpretations, nor is the reader informed about the most "valid" of the interpretations, a practice that would become the standard in most of the commentaries, and for which al-Ṭabarī was also responsible.

The menace that philology posed to traditional exegesis was nevertheless always at work. Dexterity and shrewdness, the hallmarks of a philologically shaky traditional interpretation, always fail to bend or change the meaning of an already established key term. The word *dāll*, "unguided," for example is not only of common occurrence in the Qur'ān, but its efficacy was dependent on a clear denotation. To abruptly change its meaning when it refers to Muhammad is unsettling especially for the well-trained exegetes. Why not then take the word back to its material lexicographic meaning, denuding it of its acquired meaning and thus use the very method of philology to undermine philology? This maneuver will prove to be one of the most brilliant acts of subterfuge the *tafsīr* tradition performed on the philological-historical methodology. *Dāll* (root *ḍ-l-l*) means in the Qur'ān "to be religiously unguided," or, crudely stated, "unbelieving," but its lexical meaning is "to be lost." Could it not be that Muhammad was one day physically lost and then found his way back home? Crude as this ploy sounds, it has many advantages. It is philologically sound—almost mathematical—and if a story could be invented to support it, would be historically plausible.

The next five interpretations offered (numbers 6–11) by al-Tha'labī are exactly that. Five stories are given, each depicting an episode in which Muhammad was lost in the desert then found. The first represents the earliest level of the invention of this interpretation: Muhammad was lost in the valleys of Mecca (*shī'āb*) and then God guided him back to his grandfather.¹⁴⁹ This is a skeletal story, the blueprint on which more historically detailed narratives would subsequently be based. The second story adds two important details: Muhammad was lost when he was a child, and he was found by his arch-enemy, Abū Jahl, no less, who returned him to his grandfather. A moral is added to this story: God revealed this verse to remind Muhammad that he was saved by his enemy, i.e. God was willing to use even Muhammad's enemies to his advantage. The third story goes a little further, establishing an *ismād*, an eyewitness for the incident. What

¹⁴⁹ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 77(b).

could be more real than a worried grandfather circumambulating the *Ka'bah* in supplication for his grandson's return?

The fourth story is a veritable flight of the imagination. Here the historical checks are deserted to admit a more salvational presentation of the purported incident. The story is taken from the *mawlid al-rasūl* traditions (birth of the prophet) of Ka'b al-Aḥbār.¹⁵⁰ Fantastical elements abound and Muhammad is not a mere child, rather a prophet-to-be, who is ever protected and guided by the Lord. As the wet nurse is bringing Muhammad back from the desert to Mecca she hears a thundering voice from heaven welcoming the prophet-to-be into his home. The fantastical seems commonplace and mundane; apparently everybody has by now realized that the boy Muhammad is a supernatural phenomenon, and no supernatural incident involving him seems to arouse wonder. The wet nurse leaves Muhammad for a moment to attend to her attire (note the attention to dramatical details and their mixture with the fantastical); she hears a thud and realizes that Muhammad has disappeared. Crying and invoking the pagan deities al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, she swears to kill herself if she does not find him. In the midst of the commotion (people have joined her in search for Muhammad) an old man appears and claims to know how to find Muhammad, or at least who could find him. He goes to the great idol Hubal of the Meccan pantheon, and implores him to find the boy Muhammad. The idol Hubal answers, ordering the old man out, for in Muhammad lies the destruction of the whole pantheon. Shaken, the old man comes back to the wet nurse with the realization that Muhammad must have a lord of his own who will bring him back. Never mind that the idols are given ontological reality albeit destructible.

The wet nurse has no other choice but to go empty-handed to the grandfather, who with a mere look at her realizes the gravity of the situation. He summons the whole tribe to his command (a political embellishment, since it is a reference to the supposed primacy of the clan of Hāshim in the Quraysh confederacy, a historical fallacy). Quraysh declares its unanimous support in the effort to find the boy (thus Quraysh was apparently all along aware of the significance of the boy Muhammad). All effort to find the boy fails. The grandfather

¹⁵⁰ In this tradition Muhammad is presented as a latter-day Jesus child, with miracles happening at every other turn.

has one recourse: to circumambulate the shrine of Mecca and supplicate its Lord for the return of Muhammad. Then a voice is heard saying that Muhammad has a Lord that cares for him. The grandfather asks the voice for the whereabouts of Muhammad, upon which he is told that Muhammad is safe under the Tree of Grace (*shajarat al-yumn*). The grandfather sets out for this mysterious tree, where he is accompanied by the priest Waraqah, there they found the boy eating from the leaves and oblivious to anything else.

As we see, an interpretive tradition that started in the pseudo-philological historical plane ends up in the salvational and the miraculous. But the effect is the same: Muhammad was physically lost, not spiritually. Indeed he was in a sort of a mystical communion with his Lord under a mysterious tree while he was "lost." Here a subtle irony is introduced, and the word "*ḍāllan*" seems to point to Muhammad's proximity to God and his *ḍalāl* is really a *ḍalāl* from his own pagan people.

In the fifth story, the devil appears as the protagonist. While escorting the caravan of his future wife Khadījah, Muhammad's camel was led by the devil, who directed it away from the road. The angel Gabriel appears and blows the devil away and leads Muhammad back to the caravan. Al-Tha'labī then quotes an anonymous interpretation (our sixth story) which states that Muhammad was lost during his heavenly journey to God and was guided to the Throne. This last story is a departure from the previous five stories and their earthly plane. If Muhammad has ever been lost, this interpretation implies, he was in Heaven, where being lost is an impossibility since all along Muhammad was in the care of his Lord during this journey. Having finished with the story-based interpretations, al-Tha'labī then adduces another pseudo-philological interpretation, which we have already discussed in section C.¹⁵¹ The final section of interpretation offered by al-Tha'labī consists entirely of Sufi interpretations all avoiding any hint of Muhammad's paganism.

Al-Tha'labī does not come out in favor of any of the twenty interpretations. They are presented more or less in their chronological order, with no editorial comment. Yet, the material itself reflects the evolution of the interpretation away from any hint of Muhammad's

¹⁵¹ This is the interpretation that states that the Arabs call a lonely tree in the desert a "lost tree." Lost people are guided when they see it! See section C of this chapter.

early paganism. But al-Tha'labī was not a mere collector of material; his anthological approach is itself a hermeneutical position that differentiates him radically from other exegetes. His main concern is to preserve all the possible interpretations for a verse regardless of their origins. Moreover, the incorporation of mystical interpretations is a revolutionary innovation in the exegetical tradition.¹⁵²

I have already presented al-Ṭabarī's interpretation for this verse, and I will here draw into the picture two more commentators who came after al-Tha'labī in order to show the differences in their anthological approach. In his interpretation on this verse, al-Zamakhsharī, the supposed paragon of philological acumen, performs what amounts to be a purely doctrinal interpretation. The traditional interpretations of the verse are radically edited and rearranged while the theology that dictated his approach is fully articulated. Indeed, the subtlety that characterized al-Tha'labī's presentation is all but gone. Al-Zamakhsharī starts by adducing what appears to be the boldest of interpretations: admitting that Muhammad was ignorant of "the science of Islamic law" (*ilm al-sharā'ī*) and that "which is based on *samā'*," received or revealed knowledge. As I have already mentioned, this interpretation has the merit of appearing to disclose fully the meaning of the word "erring," yet in reality it merely asserts historical truths about Muhammad: He could not have been aware of laws and revelation before they were dispensed to him by God! Nothing is said about his belief in the pagan deities. Al-Zamakhsharī then mentions, in a very summarized way, three versions of the stories of Muhammad's getting lost in the desert: "it is said that Muhammad was lost in his youth in the desert and was found by Abū Jahl; it is also said that his wet nurse lost him on the outskirts of Mecca on her way to return him to his grandfather, and it is said that he was lost during a caravan trip to Syria."¹⁵³ As we see, this is a synopsis of the stories already presented at length by al-Tha'labī. Al-Zamakhsharī's use of the phrase "it is said" (*wa-qīla*) shows clearly that he does not take these interpretations seriously. In any case the synopsis prevents the reader from assessing the value of these interpretations on their own; the exegete had read them for the reader, issued his judgment, and left us with only the barest outline.

¹⁵² On the mystical material see Chapter Six, section A.

¹⁵³ Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 220.

Al-Zamakhsharī is of course still an anthological exegete, but the materials are arranged and presented to obscure one possible explanation, one given by al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī: that Muhammad was a pagan before he was called to become a prophet. That this was the case is evidently clear from al-Zamakhsharī's detailed refutation of the interpretation that states "that Muhammad was a follower of the affair of his tribe for forty years." He states:

those who state that he was on the affair of his tribe for forty years and mean by that that Muhammad was oblivious to revealed sciences (*ʿulūm al-samʿiyyah*), [then] that interpretation is correct; but if they mean that he was a follower of his tribe's religion and a heathen like them, then the phrase is absolutely wrong. For prophets should be infallible and free of sin whether minor or major, before and after their call to prophecy. If that is not so, how could a prophet be a heathen and how could he be ignorant of the creator?—*We should be cautious of what we say*—and how could a prophet win an argument with the heathens if he ever was one himself?¹⁵⁴

Here we have an interpretation of an interpretation, a brilliant maneuver to salvage the integrity of the doctrine of the infallibility of the prophets. If al-Zamakhsharī is unable to give us the "plain meaning of the verse" at least he is bold enough to offer the doctrinal reasons that prevent him from accepting such a plain reading. A would-be prophet cannot be ignorant of the creator, and as such the verse has to mean something else. The praise from modern scholars showered on al-Zamakhsharī, however, has more to do with their intellectual affinity with his Muʿtazilite theology than with a balanced analysis of his approach to the Qurʾān. Al-Zamakhsharī is as doctrinally motivated as any other medieval scholar.

Al-Zamakhsharī's anthological approach differs markedly from al-Thaʿlabī's. Al-Zamakhsharī was not concerned with the preservation of all the possible interpretations the Islamic tradition had produced for a certain verse, but only the ones he felt were correct. His presentation was incomplete, summarizing here and rearranging there. Most significantly he refuted any interpretation that compromised a doctrinal position he was unwilling to see threatened. Thus the creative tension that is the hallmark of the anthological approach is severely impaired by the act of deciding which of the interpretations presented is valid and which is false (especially if the 'valid' is philo-

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

logically unsound and the 'invalid' is the most probable meaning). We have in al-Zamakhsharī's work an anthological commentary that is presenting a monovalent reading of the quranic text. As an exegete who is supposed to give primacy to the philological approach, al-Zamakhsharī is a disappointment.¹⁵⁵

Al-Qurṭubī, though as broad as al-Thaʿlabī in his anthological approach, is unwilling to let the tradition speak for itself. He presents the same material as al-Thaʿlabī, but with a major readjustment: he postpones to the end the first two interpretations (where Muhammad is said to be a follower of the affair of his tribe), and puts last the pseudo-philological interpretation (which I presented in section C).¹⁵⁶ He then comes out strongly in favor of this last interpretation. Al-Qurṭubī finishes by offering an extensive refutation of the one interpretation that presents Muhammad as a pagan. Here we encounter a new method of neutralizing this disturbing reality. Muhammad was a pagan but only in *ẓāhir* (in appearance); however, in *bāʿin* (in reality) he was a believer. Al-Qurṭubī refers the reader to another place in his commentary where he has already refuted that possibility at length.¹⁵⁷ Al-Qurṭubī, though more faithful to the anthological spirit of *tafsīr* as perfected by al-Thaʿlabī, is unable to resist restricting its effect. By doing so he compromises the polyvalency of the text which only a hands-off anthological approach could guarantee.

I would like, finally, to give examples of al-Thaʿlabī's guarded neutrality when his anthological approach presents hermeneutical problems that he is unable to disregard. In his commentary on verse 87:14–15, "Happy shall be the man who purifies himself, who remembers the name of his Lord and prays," al-Thaʿlabī brings forth various interpretations stemming from different periods of the exegetical tradition.¹⁵⁸ One of the interpretations claims that the purification in these verses refers to the alms (money) one gives at the Muslim festival of Ramaḍān while the prayer is the one that is performed on that holiday. Now since sura 87 was revealed in Mecca this presents us with a chronological impossibility, for alms and the special prayer

¹⁵⁵ The popularity of al-Zamakhsharī among modern scholars is rather puzzling. His commentary was of the *madrasa* style commentary, and as such was not as inclusive as encyclopedic commentaries. His approach could never be criticized for lacking in comprehensiveness, for it was not intended as such.

¹⁵⁶ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, v. 20: 96–99.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., v. 20: 99.

¹⁵⁸ Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kāshf*, M107, fol. 96(b)–97(a).

for Ramaḍān were instituted two years after the Hijra to Medina. Al-Thaʿlabī, aware of this anachronism, finishes the commentary on this verse by raising the issue but leaving the matter to the reader to decide: "And I [al-Thaʿlabī] say: I am not sure how this exegesis (*taʿwīl*) is to be taken since this sura is Meccan according to the opinion of every authority (*bi-ijmāʿ*), and there were no Ramaḍān holiday prayers or Ramaḍān alms in Mecca. God knows best!"¹⁵⁹ As we can see, al-Thaʿlabī is at once unwilling to drop this interpretation, unwilling to refute it, and unwilling to disregard the problem. Here the tension between the tradition and the exegetical skills of the author is all the more poignant for being unresolved. Neither al-Ṭabarī¹⁶⁰ nor al-Zamakhsharī,¹⁶¹ though they mention the same interpretation, are aware of the anachronism, or if they were, they had no compunctions about it; al-Qurṭubī, who closely follows al-Thaʿlabī, does raise the issue.¹⁶²

Another example of the great extent to which al-Thaʿlabī went to avoid missing any interpretation is his commentary on verse 88:17: "Do they not reflect on the camels, and how they were created?" Having finished his detailed anthropological interpretation of the significance of the camels to the Arabs, he mentions a curious, rather outlandish, explanation for the word camels (*ibil*). It was said (*qīla*) that the word "*ibil*" here means clouds (*saḥāb*). Al-Thaʿlabī then adds: "I did not find any confirmation for this interpretation in the works of the major scholars: *wa-lam ajid liḥālīka aṣlan fī kutub al-aʿimmah*."¹⁶³ Clearly, al-Thaʿlabī thinks little of this interpretation, but notice how circumspect he is in his refutation. He informs the reader that there is no support for such an interpretation in the works of the recognized authorities, no more, no less. No sarcasm, no belittling, simply a statement that he has failed to find an *aṣl* (origin, a proof) to support it. It was an interpretation worth mentioning anyhow.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., M107, fol. 97(a): *qult wa-lā adri mā wajhu ḥādḥa al-taʿwīl, li-anna ḥādhihi al-sūrah makkīyah bi-ijmāʿ wa-lam yakun bi-Makkah ʿid wa-lā zakāt fīr. wa-Allāh aʿlam.*

¹⁶⁰ *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, v. 30: 156–157.

¹⁶¹ *Al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 205.

¹⁶² *Al-Jāmiʿ*, v. 20: 22.

¹⁶³ *Al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 100(a).

CHAPTER SIX

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE:
TENDENCIES AND TRAJECTORIES

I will complete here the analysis and description of the nature of classical *tafsīr* as fashioned by al-Thaʿlabī that I undertook in Chapter Five. *Tafsīr* was made by al-Thaʿlabī into an integrative discipline, and as such it was able to grow and develop through incorporating other disciplines in order to achieve its aims. The disparate methods from the different disciplines that al-Thaʿlabī included in his commentary were not only sometimes incongruous with one another—as are, for example, philological interpretations and the mystical ones examined in this chapter—but the effect of including others was almost revolutionary, as was al-Thaʿlabī's incorporation in *tafsīr* of poetry *qua* poetry. Yet the harmony al-Thaʿlabī was able to create among these methods is remarkable and his weaving together, almost seamlessly, of different disciplines deserves the special attention it will receive in this chapter. In al-Thaʿlabī's hands, the Qurʾān interpreted brought about a harmony within the world that the Qurʾān itself had created. There is a hermeneutical circle here: the Qurʾān was being explained by the disciplines produced by the culture that the Qurʾān had brought into being, and the Qurʾān was making these disciplines sanctified, almost as an ontological necessity, by the mere act of incorporating them into the divine realm. The cultural significance of *tafsīr* was thus far greater than "explaining" the Qurʾān. *Tafsīr* was making the world itself comprehensible.

A. The Mystical Interpretations and the Polyvalency of the Quranic Text

In his seminal article "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham" Norman Calder proposes three main features that set the genre of Qurʾān commentary apart from other disciplines.¹ The first is "the presence of the complete canonical text of the Qurʾān

¹ In *Approaches to the Qurʾān*, 100–140.

(or at least a significant chunk of it) segmented for purposes of comment, and dealt with in canonical order."² The second is the "citation of named authorities and the consequent polyvalent reading of the text."³ The third is what he calls "instrumental and ideological structures" which include: orthography, lexis, syntax, rhetoric, symbol/allegory, prophetic history, theology, eschatology, law and *ṭasawwuf* (mysticism).⁴

The features Calder presents are insightful but in need of refinement. In section D of Chapter Five have tried to show that the citation of authorities in *tafsīr* literature (what I called its anthological nature) should be differentiated from the presentation of the Qur'ān as a polyvalent text. The one does not presuppose the other; for more than one authority can propose the same interpretation for a certain verse; and one exegete can propose more than one interpretation for a verse. Indeed, even an exegete like al-Zamakhsharī, whom Calder considers to be an exegete who presented a consistently polyvalent reading of the Qur'ān, is in many aspects both anthological and a monovalent exegete. An anthological approach to the Qur'ān can only be polyvalent when editorial comments by exegetes are either manifestly absent or presented in a neutral way. I have argued that al-Tha'labī presents a unique moment in Islamic exegetical tradition because he was able to be anthologically comprehensive and because he was able to consistently present a polyvalent reading of the text, avoiding any editorial comments that showed preference to one interpretation over the other.⁵

In this section I will demonstrate this claim further; the proof lies in al-Tha'labī's incorporation of mystical interpretations in his Qur'ān commentary. No mainstream exegete before al-Tha'labī managed or dared to incorporate mystical contemplative interpretations into his works. The antagonism towards mystical interpretations of the Qur'ān was always strong in mainstream exegesis. The boldness of al-Tha'labī's venture can only be appreciated when compared to the position taken by his student al-Wāhidī, who, although trained by the master, was a bitter opponent of mystical interpretations. In a famous statement he castigates al-Sulamī, the author of one of the most famous mystical interpretations, and his work.⁶ He scornfully dis-

² Ibid., 100.

³ Ibid., 103.

⁴ Ibid., 105–106.

⁵ An exception would be his discussion on verse *al-mutashābihāt* (3:7) where the whole exegetical enterprise was at stake.

⁶ See al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'īyah al-Kubrā*, v. 5: 241.

misses the work, and excommunicates al-Sulamī should he insist on calling his work a Qur'ān commentary or *tafsīr*. According to al-Wāhidī mystical interpretations are not real interpretations, and should not be accorded the epithet "quranic interpretation."

The reasons for the rejection of the mystical approach by the mainstream exegetes lie in the absence of rules that govern its application on one hand, and of an authority that guarantees its acceptance on the other hand. The absence of rules was inherent in a hermeneutical method that claimed "taste" (*dhawq*) as its main tool. Neither philology nor traditions were invoked as sources for deciphering the word of God. Thus at a time when the exegetical tradition was claiming to be a science, with clear rules and boundaries, mystical interpretation was undermining such a claim and was a reminder of the arbitrariness that lurks behind any hermeneutical act. But perhaps what impeded the admittance of mystical interpretation into the mainstream most, was the lack of an authoritatively recognized voice behind this trend. Mystical personalities who advanced these interpretations were, at least initially, on the periphery of the Islamic tradition; they were suspected, persecuted, and sometimes even excommunicated. Theirs was a suspicious voice, and it would take someone like al-Ghazālī to pave the way for their admittance to the mainstream tradition.⁷

Thus the incorporation of mystical material into al-Tha'labī's commentary demonstrates more than any other act his determination to produce a comprehensive anthological commentary, a commentary that leaves out nothing of the tradition of interpretation—apart from the Mu'tazilite approach which he considered to be beyond the pale.⁸ The circumference of his exegetical circle is thus unique in Islamic history, encompassing everything from the earliest level (the Ibn 'Abbās tradition) to that of his own contemporaries and including the mystical as well. Thus at the very moment the philological approach was given primacy in quranic exegesis, the mystical approach was also admitted, creating in the Qur'ān a text that was both humanly accessible and divinely mysterious. The Qur'ān was both fully decipherable through the intellect and utterly beyond the realm of reason at the same time. The word of God was both manifestly

⁷ Gerhard Bowering, "Early Sufism Between Persecution and Heresy," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, Frederick De Jong and Bernd Radtke, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), 45–67.

⁸ As readers we were made aware of his antagonism for the Mu'tazilī tradition, and thus heedful of the elimination.

clear (*mubīn*) and ineffable (*sirr*). As the text was being confined it was being set free. Al-Tha'labī is one of the few exegetes who offered his readers the two extremes of the exegetical tradition.

Moreover, by admitting the mystical interpretation into his commentary, al-Tha'labī made the Qur'ān the most polyvalent text in Islamic culture: it was the only text that was decipherable both philologically and mystically. This was a natural outcome of al-Tha'labī's striving to accord the Qur'ān a unique position in the Islamic hierarchy of texts. The Qur'ān was, in the hands of al-Tha'labī a text able to respond in a living manner to all major trends in Islamic culture. But what is significant about al-Tha'labī's polyvalent reading of the Qur'ān was his judicious refusal to grant or accord any reading a preferential wink. The readings are piled, arranged beside each other (mostly chronologically), and the reader is never advised or cajoled into favoring one over the other. Mystical interpretations were not only admitted into the commentary, a feat in itself, but they were treated equally.

Finally, we have to pay attention to the mode in which al-Tha'labī introduced the mystical interpretations into his commentary. There was no justification for their incorporation, no apologies, and no embarrassment; it is as if the mystical vision was part of the general culture and not the object of the *Kulturkampf* of early medieval Islam. His incorporation of this material is an audacious gesture and testimony to his sagacity, for shortly after al-Tha'labī mysticism, as an intellectual current, would move from the periphery to the center, and Islamic medieval civilization would be heavily shaped by the mystical vision.

Despite these pioneering efforts of al-Tha'labī, however, the tradition remained hostile to mystical interpretations and on the whole quranic exegesis was kept as free as possible of the influence of mysticism. But only up to a point, for the work of al-Tha'labī would become extremely influential and the basis of many subsequent Qur'ān commentaries. Thus the mystical interpretations were admitted indirectly through al-Tha'labī's commentary. Most notably al-Tha'labī's commentary lies at the heart of al-Qurṭubī's, one of the most widely-read of commentaries, and thus the mystical reading of the Qur'ān was allowed a wide circulation in the Islamic world.

The unavailability of al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary to modern scholars and the complete absence of an understanding of the genealogical tree of the medieval Qur'ān exegetical tradition have led to some confusion as to the role of mystical interpretation in the

tradition. Norman Calder has argued that mystical interpretations "[are] only marginally present throughout the *tafsīr* tradition until a very late date."⁹ He goes so far as to characterize the *tafsīr* tradition as condemnatory of "mere meditation on the text (without authority), and of mystical and allegorical readings."¹⁰ This characterization would have been correct were it not the case that the work of al-Tha'labī forces us to reexamine the development of the whole tradition.¹¹ Mystical interpretations made early inroads into the tradition, and al-Ghazālī's justification for mysticism appears, in light of al-Tha'labī's work, far less pioneering than was earlier thought.¹²

It is not my intention in this section to analyze the content of the mystical interpretations offered by al-Tha'labī, an endeavor that lies beyond the scope of this study.¹³ I am mainly concerned with the implications of the introduction of this new mode of interpretation into the mainstream exegetical tradition. The primary result of this infusion was to transform the prosaic in the Qur'ān to the profound. By that I mean that the language of the Qur'ān, especially when philologically clear and syntactically transparent, would become prolific in meanings, meanings which were not possible or imaginable to extract through the usual approach. Thus, although al-Tha'labī would quote the mystical interpretations almost consistently, he would make sure to quote at length when interpreting the prosaic verses where quotations from the traditional interpreters were scarce due to the lack of obvious problems in the text.

Compare for example what al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī have to say about the phrase "but the best provision is god-fearing (*al-taqwā*)" of verse 2:197. The complete verse reads, "The pilgrimage is in months well-known; whoso undertakes the duty of pilgrimage in them shall not go in to his womenfolk nor indulge in ungodliness and disputing in the pilgrimage. Whatever good you do God knows it. And take provisions; *but the best provision is god-fearing (al-taqwā)*." Al-Ṭabarī has this to say about the phrase: "but goodness is in being god-fearing

⁹ Calder, *Tafsīr*, 109–110.

¹⁰ Ibid., 134.

¹¹ Calder was aware of al-Tha'labī's commentary but he had no access to it ("The *tafsīr* of Tha'labī is not available in full"), *ibid.*, 118.

¹² On al-Ghazālī's mystical exegesis see Gerald Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 124–136.

¹³ It would be extremely fruitful to study the difference between al-Tha'labī's mystical interpretations and al-Sulamī's in light of the marked difference between the material chosen by the two.

[Muslims], avoiding that which you were not allowed to do in your pilgrimage, and doing that which you were enjoined to do, for (god fearing) is the best of provisions, thus take it as a provision"; he then adds "god-fearing means obeying God's [injunctions] and we have already expounded on the meaning of 'god-fearing' (*al-taqwā*) and there is no need to repeat that here" (my italics).¹⁴ Observe the negating effect of the phrase "there is no need to repeat that here" on the hermeneutical act; the meaning, though given, is apparently located somewhere else and has to be sought there; the reader is deprived of the satisfaction of knowing what *taqwā* means here. More significantly, this cross-referencing on the part of al-Ṭabarī is discomforting theologically for it points to a redundancy in the Qur'ān, a Qur'ān that seems to generate no new meaning at certain loci.

Al-Tha'labī would uncharacteristically drop what al-Ṭabarī has to say and quote only the mystics (*ahl al-ishārah*).¹⁵ This is rather unusual in the practice of al-Tha'labī, who broadly cites mystical interpretations after citing the traditional ones. One can advance different explanations for this deviation on the part of al-Tha'labī, but one is tempted to see here a snub to al-Ṭabarī's cross-referencing. The quranic phrase has a profound meaning and if traditional exegetes were unable to fathom it, al-Tha'labī would seem to suggest, the mystics did. What the traditional interpretation failed to see was the discordance in verse 2:197 between the injunction to take material provisions in preparation for the pilgrimage trip and then following the injunction with a declarative statement stressing that the best provision is god-fearing, thus appearing to hint that material provisions are not necessary. The mystical interpretation offered by al-Tha'labī sees in the declaration "but the best provision is god-fearing" a reminder of the other journey that Muslims have to take, the journey to the other realm, the afterlife journey, where only good deeds and one's piety are the provisions that count. "God" according to this mystical interpretation "reminded the believers of the afterlife journey, and He enjoined the believers to take provisions for the two abodes, for verily, god-fearing is the provision of the next world." The discordance in the verse is only apparent; material provisions are what the Muslim needs for this worldly journey and spiritual provisions are for the afterlife trip. At the very moment that God is

¹⁴ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 2: 281.

¹⁵ *Al-Kashf*, M99, fol. 49(a-b).

ordering the believers to be vigilant about their worldly affairs, He reminds them that god-fearing is the provision for the other world. Al-Tha'labī then finishes by quoting three pieces of poetry that elaborate on the theme of the afterlife journey and its provisions.

Reading al-Ṭabarī's interpretation, one is hardly made aware of the resonance of the phrase at hand, "but the best provision is god-fearing," in Islamic literature. It is, as one could imagine, a catchphrase in Islamic pietistic statements. The poetry adduced by al-Tha'labī, on the other hand, re-establishes the link between the quranic phrase and the pietistic literature and reminds the reader that the Qur'ān was a main source of pithy phrases that summarized the ideals of the Islamic world view.

Another example of the process of creating a loquacious Qur'ān by the act of incorporating mystical interpretations is al-Tha'labī's treatment of the phrase "God is All-Gentle (*laṭīf*) to His servants" of verse 42:19. Here we see a radical departure for what the Qur'ān is about and what its interpretation should be. The phrase that all reject, to use a Christian metaphor, is the corner stone for a new world. The *lutf* of God (His gentleness), one of His 99 names, is at the heart of a Muslim conception of who God is by al-Tha'labī's time. In his interpretation of this verse he reconnects the two worlds, the quranic and the pietistic, through an elaboration on one of the names of God. Let us compare the different approaches to this phrase in the exegetical tradition. Al-Ṭabarī simply rephrases its words, and thus "God is All-Gentle (*laṭīf*) to His servant" becomes "God of gentleness (*dhū lutf*) to His servants."¹⁶ As usual, in the prosaic places in the Qur'ān, al-Ṭabarī resorts to rephrasing, if only to reassert the clarity of God's text. But why should we expect more? After all, the words of the phrase could not be more transparent. The statement "God is gentle to His servants" is rather mundane, if not completely prosaic even in the quranic context where such phrases are commonly used.

The phrase, on the other hand, required at least two pages of explanation in al-Tha'labī's commentary, with a total of 23 different interpretations.¹⁷ Indeed we are surprised to see that he quotes from traditional commentators at the beginning of his interpretation, people like Ibn 'Abbās, 'Ikrimah, al-Suddī, and Muqātil. These should

¹⁶ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 25: 20.

¹⁷ *Al-Kashf*, III Ahmet 76/4, (Topkapi Saray), fols. 16(b)-17(a).

have been quoted by al-Ṭabarī, but were not. The bulk of the interpretations quoted by al-Thaʿlabī, however, comes from the mystical camp.¹⁸ At the center of these interpretations is a merciful benevolent God who cares for his creatures. By refusing to abide with al-Ṭabarī's idea of what is worthy of interpretation and what is not, al-Thaʿlabī in a sense saved the exegetical tradition from atrophying. Verses that were never commented upon by al-Ṭabarī are showered with attention, thus assuring the growth of the tradition. But what is more remarkable is the insistence of al-Thaʿlabī on the uniqueness of each quranic locus. I mean by this his refusal to cross-reference similar terms that keep recurring in the Qurʾān.¹⁹ Thus although he has paused at length on the word *laṭīf* before, when it first appeared in the Qurʾān in verse 6:103, he offers still more interpretations for the term when it appears in verse 42:19, without referring the reader to the earlier site.²⁰ Not only do the two sites generate different meanings but al-Thaʿlabī explicitly informs the reader that the term *laṭīf* has been the subject of immense speculation among the exegetes.²¹ *Laṭīf* as one of the names of God has generated enough discussion that one can supply endless interpretations whenever the term appears in the Qurʾān.

Another important implication from the introduction of the mystical interpretation into the mainstream tradition was the mimetic effect it generated in the tradition. Al-Thaʿlabī would not only quote mystical interpretations but he mimicked the mystical method and generated new mystical interpretations for many verses which have no interpretation in the mystical tradition. The mystical effect was thus not confined to quotations only, but it resulted in a diffusive influence that entered into the picture by this mimetic and reproductive act. The mystical interpretive act, though very personal and almost wholly lacking in rules to follow, was nonetheless mimicked, for the mere existence of the mystical material exerted a generative influence on al-Thaʿlabī. The result was a loquacious Qurʾān, a Qurʾān profuse in meaning at every level.

A good example of the effect of the incorporation of mystical interpretation into the mainstream exegesis is al-Thaʿlabī's treatment

¹⁸ Ibid., fol. 17(a).

¹⁹ Al-Qurṭubī, who copies al-Thaʿlabī in both verses, does make the cross-reference. See his commentary on the two verses.

²⁰ *Al-Kaṣṣh*, III Ahmet 76/2 (Topkapi Saray), fol. 63(a).

²¹ *wa-qad akthar al-ʿulamāʾ fi maʿnā al-laṭīf*. Ibid.

of verse 2:152 (or more exactly, the first half of this verse). The verse commands the believers to remember God that He may remember them (*fa-dhkurūnī adhkurkum*: So remember Me and I will remember you). Once more it will be instructive for us to compare al-Thaʿlabī's approach with that of three other exegetes: al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Qurṭubī.

Al-Ṭabarī offers two different interpretations for the phrase in verse 2:152.²² It means, according to the first interpretation, that the believers are asked to remember God by observing His prohibitions and commands so He will remember them by His forgiveness and mercy. The second possible meaning is that the remembrance referred to here means a glorification and thanksgiving for God. The sentence was clearly an unproblematic text for al-Ṭabarī; there were no lengthy discussions accompanying the interpretations, no grammatical structures to be analyzed, and apparently the phrase was not a locus that produced layers of meanings. Indeed three centuries later al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation for this phrase was even more terse, barely a few words, giving only one interpretation: remember me with obedience and I (God) will remember you with rewards.²³

In al-Thaʿlabī's interpretation of this verse, on the contrary, we witness a remarkable expansion in its meaning, if not an explosion.²⁴ No less than fifty possible interpretations are given for this phrase. We are thus forced to seek an explanation for the sudden appearance of this prodigious amount of interpretation. The passage of time is not a sufficient explanation for this phenomenon. Something happened to quranic exegesis that made it possible to generate this many interpretations for a phrase that was, nonetheless, becoming progressively more uninteresting to many exegetes.²⁵ Wherever the reason lies, it could not be attributed to the outlook that shaped al-Ṭabarī or al-Zamakhsharī. The explanation has to be sought in the influence of the mystical tradition of quranic interpretation. Mystical interpreters found in this verse a fountain of meanings, and al-Sulamī has collected a large number of their interpretations.²⁶ While incorporating

²² *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, v. 2: 37.

²³ *Al-Kaṣṣh*, v. 1: 103. "*fa-dhkurūnī bi-al-ṭāʾat adhkurkum bi-al-thawāb*."

²⁴ See *al-Kaṣṣh*, M98, fols. 167(b)–170(a).

²⁵ As I mentioned earlier, al-Zamakhsharī three centuries later was laconic in his interpretation of this verse.

²⁶ See al-Sulamī's *ʿUyūdāt Haqāʾiq al-tafsīr* (*The Minor Qurʾān Commentary of al-Sulamī*), Gerhard Böwering, ed. (Beirut: Dar el-machreq, 1995), 14. For his major Qurʾān commentary see the British Library manuscript, Or. 9433, fol. 15(a–b).

many of al-Sulamī's mystical interpretations to this verse, al-Tha'labī also offers far more. We are here witnessing not only the incorporation of the mystical interpretations into the mainstream tradition, but a mimicking of the process of mystical quranic interpretation. Indeed, the structure of the interpretations of this verse and their arrangements as offered by al-Tha'labī mimic a *dhikr* mystical session (*ḥalaqat dhikr*, a devotional ritual remembrance of God), in which the ceremony starts at a slow tempo, peaks into a frenzy then levels off again.

Al-Tha'labī starts his interpretation by quoting those already advanced by al-Ṭabarī. Yet a significant detail is noticeable; each interpretation is justified by quoting another verse from the Qur'ān. This is a well-established method, whereby a verse is elucidated through the citation of another comparable verse that uses similar wording or revolves around the same theme. However the technique here fails blatantly and rings false, for the verses adduced in justification of the proposed meanings do not support these interpretations in any way. One wonders why al-Tha'labī supports interpretations that could stand on their own by the mere fact that they stem from recognized authorities. A closer look indicates that he embarked on this method so that he could justify the appearance of mystical interpretations. After several mystically oriented interpretations, justified by the same method, al-Tha'labī quotes a crescendo of interpretations modeled in the form of "remember Me by doing this, and I will remember you by doing that."²⁷ In all, thirty such phrases are given in rapid succession with no introductions (like the phrase: "it is said," which al-Tha'labī regularly uses to introduce anonymous interpretations). This is the section that I have likened to the mystical trance, where the interpretive process resembles a mystical ecstatic moment. This section ends by quoting a quranic verse "and to mention (*dhikr*) God is greater" (29:54). One does wonder why this verse in particular was quoted here if not to remind us of the main foundation of the mystical worldview: *dhikr* and the centrality of *dhikr*.

The final section of al-Tha'labī's interpretation of verse 2:152 is a return to the traditional interpretations (al-Tha'labī has left some for the end); the tone is more somber, and the names of illustrious traditional authorities stand behind the meanings offered. The last interpretation is a tautological rendering of the verse and not an

²⁷ *udhkurūnī bi-... adhkurkum bi-...*

explanation; its effect is decisive in assuaging any misgivings the reader may have experienced during the reading of the previous effusive section. Here, a certain 'Uthmān al-Nahdī is reported to have said that he is able to tell when God mentions or remembers him; when asked for an explanation for the certainty of his assertions, he quotes the verse 2:152 and simply adds: "if I remember God He remembers me."²⁸ The structure of the interpretation for verse 2:152 is thus modeled after the mystical remembrance (*dhikr*) sessions: a beginning, a middle and a finale. The content and the structure combine to reassert the legitimacy of the mystical interpretations.

Al-Qurṭubī, who as I mentioned earlier quotes frequently from al-Tha'labī, deletes the mystical trance-like section in his treatment of this verse and tones down the effusive nature of the interpretation as offered by al-Tha'labī.²⁹ This rare instance where al-Qurṭubī expurgates al-Tha'labī instead of copying him wholesale supports my analysis that this trance section was rather unusual in the tradition.

B. Fictive Narrative Interpretations

Coining new terms is inescapable in a field where terms are hotly debated and potentially a source of confusion rather than clarification.³⁰ It is also necessary in a field that has not yet matured. In this section, I use the term "fictive narratives" to designate exegetical material or interpretations that are narrative in nature and where the narrative has no basis in the verses being interpreted. The absence of any support in the verse for the narrative interpretation is an important characteristic in this exegetical method. It differentiates it from other narrative interpretations that are based on a trigger in the verses that they interpret. Thus an interpretation with a narrative component about Moses offered for a verse that has a direct or even a fleeting reference to the Moses story is not a fictive narrative interpretation.³¹ The word "fictive" underscores the absence of

²⁸ *Al-kashf*, M98, fol. 170(a).

²⁹ *Al-jāmi'*, v. 2: 171-172.

³⁰ See my remarks on terminology and its use in quranic studies at the beginning of Chapter Five.

³¹ Granted, this kind of interpretation might be fictive here and narrational there, but that does not qualify it for the designation. It has to have no organic relationship with the verse.

any organic relationship between the interpretation offered and the verse. The narrative sections of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (reasons of revelation) material in *tafsīr* constitute a small portion, indeed, a special category of fictive narratives. The historicity of *asbāb al-nuzūl* genre complicates the issue here, and since the historicity of the genre is an issue of debate in the modern literature, I will avoid discussing this subsection altogether.³²

The fictive narrative method of interpretation predates al-Thaʿlabī. Indeed, fictive narrative interpretations are present from the very start of the exegetical tradition.³³ Although the method is ancient, it was to become a distinctive mark in al-Thaʿlabī's approach because he employed it heavily. The importance of fictive narrative in al-Thaʿlabī's hermeneutical method is thus one of emphasis rather than invention. It was used by al-Thaʿlabī for various reasons: theological, grammatical, pietistic (or for admonition), artistic, and political.

I will give an example of such interpretations to illustrate what I mean by the term fictive narratives. In interpreting the first two verses of sura 102, the exegetical tradition (starting with al-Thaʿlabī) found it necessary to offer another interpretation in addition to the old literal one, in the form of a story, a narrative. Verses 102:1–2 read: "Gross rivalry diverts you, even till you visit the tombs." This is Arberry's translation; it is misleading since it does not render the original wording of the verses but the interpretation, the fictive narrative one, that has become dominant in the tradition. A more appropriate interpretation would be "Abundance diverts you until you come to the graves". Or better still, "you are consumed with amassing wealth till the day you are buried." The verses and the sura as

³² For a detailed discussion of *asbāb al-nuzūl* see Andrew Rippin's "The Function of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* in Qur'anic Exegesis," in *BSOAS* 51 (1988): 1–20. Most of *asbāb al-nuzūl* material is of the fictive narrative kind. There will always be a possibility that some might be historically true and as such not fictive. There is internal evidence from the Qurʾān that some suras were indeed revealed as a response to an incident or a request.

³³ For a good example of an early fictive narrative as preserved by al-Ṭabarī (and of course by al-Thaʿlabī) see al-Ṭabarī's commentary on verse 59:16, "... Satan, who, when he ordered man to disbelieve and man did his bidding, said to him: 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, Lord of the universe.'" Al-Ṭabarī offers a long story of a monk who was seduced by the devil to fornicate. The story is impossible to relate to the verse in question. The dialogue in the verse must have been the trigger that set the exegetical imagination in search for a story. See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, v. 28: 49–51; for al-Thaʿlabī's commentary on the same verse see *al-Kaṣṣ*, M106 fols. 98–101.

a whole are in line with several early short suras that speak about the intrinsically ungrateful and heedless nature of human beings. This view of humanity was too difficult to accept later—believers were more and more seen as ontologically different from the rest of humanity—and a story to separate the believers from the unbelievers was invented and offered as an interpretation for the two verses. The story pitted two pagan or Jewish families (or tribes, depending on the version) against each other in a boastful competition over their wealth and numbers. The two tribes took a head count of their fellow tribesmen and so heated and passionate was this obscene obsession with their numbers that they headed to the cemetery to count their dead.³⁴ Thus the verse as such is not referring to human beings in general (which would encompass the believers) but to the pre-Islamic tribes, their arrogance, hubris and obliviousness to the fact that all wealth is from the Lord. The fictive story, brilliant on many levels, was convincing enough that even modern European scholars have been caught in its web.³⁵ It also fits well with the image the Islamic tradition tried to present regarding the "age of ignorance" (*al-Jāhiliyyah*) of pre-Islamic Arabia.

Let us go back to the two verses and examine them closely. There is nothing in the two verses about tribes or Jewish families; the pronoun is in the second person plural speech, leaving no doubt that humanity was being addressed (or at least Muḥammad's tribe). And the phrase 'visiting the graves' is a clear reference to death. (It may be worth noting that visitation to graveyards is post-Islamic, as pagan Arabs did not believe in the immortality of the soul or resurrection). Al-Ṭabarī does not know of any boasting match; he understands the phrase 'visiting the graves' categorically as death.³⁶ Actually, al-Thaʿlabī himself offers the literal reading as the first interpretation before he moves to the story of the boastful tribes.³⁷ The two criteria for naming an interpretive unit as a fictive narrative are thus met: first it has to tell a story, and second, the story must have no

³⁴ Thus the Arabic phrase "*zurtum al-maqābir*" (literally, visited the graveyard) is not seen as a reference to death but to one incident of visiting the graveyard in order to count the graves.

³⁵ See Rudi Paret, *Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1989), 519–520: Nach alledem scheint eine weitere, von Zamaḥṣārī vertretene Deutung, die auf den ersten Blick vielleicht gekünstelt, den Vorrang zu verdienen...

³⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, v. 30: 283–284.

³⁷ *Al-Kaṣṣ*, M107, fol. 142(b).

basis in the verse interpreted. This fictive story would eventually crowd out the more literal reading, as is clear in the work of post-al-Tha'labī commentators who gave precedence to his interpretation over any other. As I already mentioned, even many European scholars were unable to resist the beauty of this interpretation, its drama, hubris, and pathos.

Fictive narrative interpretations were invented for several reasons, theological, political, exegetical or ethical.³⁸ It is the task of the modern scholar to untangle the story from the verse, not an easy task since many of the stories are the result of a long history of development and are thus far more polished than one suspects and easy to mistake for historical interpretations.³⁹ The moment one realizes that an interpretation is of the fictive narrative kind, the scholar has to analyze the story and what it is trying to solve or achieve and guess the function it is fulfilling. It should be clear that fictive narrative interpretation was an attractive exegetical method since there were no restrictive hermeneutical rules on the exegete save coherence.

Another example of a fictive narrative interpretation is the one offered by al-Tha'labī for verse 78:18. The verse reads: "the day the Trumpet is blown, and you shall come in troops." The Arabic for troops in this verse is *afwāj*, which was explained by al-Ṭabarī to mean groups (*zumar*).⁴⁰ Although al-Tha'labī starts with the same interpretation, he moves on to offer an elaborate fictive story about what the word groups (*afwāj*) means.⁴¹ He relates a hadith that has a companion of Muhammad reciting verse 78:18 in front of Muhammad and asking about the meaning of the word 'troops'. Muhammad replies that at the Day of Judgment there will be ten different groups of Muslims which have been sequestered from the

³⁸ I am not in agreement with Andrew Rippin on this point, who saw in some of the narrative elaboration of *asbāb al-nuzūl* nothing but "the desire to create a good yarn," see his "The Function of Asbāb," 4.

³⁹ See A. Fischer's article of "Der Wert der vorhandenen Koran-Übersetzungen und Sure 111" in *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig*, Philologisch-historische Klasse, Band 89 (1937) 2. Heft, 1–49. This article is a classic example of an exhaustive analysis of a sura and its interpretations. Fischer rightly sees the story offered by the traditional Islamic sources as apocryphal. The sura is a satirical attack on the wife of Muhammad's enemy, a fact that was played down, as the Qur'ān should not be seen to indulge in the same poetical stratagems of the contemporaneous poets.

⁴⁰ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 8.

⁴¹ *Al-Kashf*, M107, fols. 26(a)–26(b).

community of the believers. Each has been marked by a distinctive disfigurement, and the prophet proceeds to describe in detail the disfigurement each has suffered: one group was transformed into pigs, another was blind, a third deaf, a fourth grotesquely smelly. There were those who were chewing on their tongues, the ones with severed hands and legs, and those burning on fire poles. The disfigurements and sufferings were, we are told, the result of transgressions the members of each group committed. The list of vices includes: malicious gossip, money lending with interest, unjust rulings, hubris, hypocrisy, and destroying innocent lives through the government's support. The interpretation of the verse becomes thus an occasion for admonition. Once more there is nothing in the verse that supports such an elaborate interpretation. Interest on money was not banned until the very end of Muhammad's career, while this verse is Meccan; moreover a reference to governments is an anachronism in the early Meccan period.

The fictive narrative method employs many strategies to achieve plausibility. When necessary, the meaning of a phrase is taken literally instead of figuratively; thus 'visiting the graves' is no longer a euphemism for death according to this interpretive method, but a real visitation. The opposite is also true, where a figurative use of a word is preferred and the literal meaning is discarded, even though such a reading is not supported by the rhetorical tradition (the word for orphan is an example). Ethnographic information, poetic citation and detailed dramatization (including dialogues and monologues) are all employed to make the narratives plausible. Some were more successful than others, but on the whole the fictive narrative interpretations would become more and more frequent as the tradition grew.

One of the best examples of fictive narrative interpretation is the one given by al-Tha'labī for sura 92. Al-Tha'labī offers a story as to what the sura is about, and then weaves the story together with the verses of 92. It is important to point out that this fictive interpretation comes at the end of a detailed interpretation of sura 92 that reflects the more traditional interpretive material. I offer here a complete translation of this fictive interpretation:

A man of the Anṣār [the Medinan supporters of Muhammad] had a palm tree. Some of the dates from this palm tree happened to fall in a neighbor's yard whose children would eat the fallen dates. The Anṣārī [owner of the palm tree] complained to Muhammad, who offered to buy the palm tree for a palm tree in Paradise. The Anṣārī refused.

On his way out he met Abū al-Daḥdāḥ who offered to buy the palm tree for an orchard of his. The Anṣārī accepted the offer. Abū al-Daḥdāḥ went to Muhammad and offered his newly acquired palm tree for the palm tree of Paradise. Muhammad then granted him his wish and called for the neighbor (whose children were eating the dates and causing the problem) and gave him the palm tree [and resolved the conflict between the two neighbors]. Then God revealed {By the night} [92:1] till {your endeavors have varied ends} [92:4] meaning the two protagonist of the story: Abū al-Daḥdāḥ, and the Anṣārī the owner of the palm tree. {For him that gives in charity and guards himself against evil} [92:5] referring to Abū al-Daḥdāḥ {and believes in goodness} [92:6] by goodness He means the after-death reward (*al-thawāb*). {We shall smooth the path of salvation} [92:7] meaning to Paradise. {But for him that neither gives nor takes and disbelieves in goodness} [92:8] meaning the Anṣārī {and disbelieves in goodness} [92:9] meaning reward {We shall smooth him for the path of affliction} [92:10] meaning to Hell. {When he breathes his last, his riches will not avail him} [92:11] meaning if he dies. Then God says {I warn you, then, of the blazing fire, in which none shall burn save the hardened sinner} [92:14–15] meaning the owner of the palm tree, the Anṣārī {who denies and gives no heed} [92:16]. {But the good man} [92:17] meaning Abū al-Daḥdāḥ {who purifies himself by almsgiving shall keep away from it} [92:18]. {And none has with him any favor for reward} [92:19] to reward Abū al-Daḥdāḥ {except as seeking the purpose of his Lord Most High only, and he shall be content} [92:20–21] when he (Abū al-Daḥdāḥ) enters Paradise. The Prophet used to say, whenever he passed by that palm tree in fruit season, “many clusters of dates for Abū al-Daḥdāḥ in Paradise”.⁴²

As we can see from this paragraph, the whole sura has been woven into the fabric of a story that was offered by way of explaining the meaning of the verses. Of course, there is nothing in the whole sura that supports this interpretation. Indeed, before this paragraph al-Thaʿlabī offers a completely different story as another interpretation, a story that has Abū Bakr as the champion.⁴³ Thus he gives more than one fictive narrative interpretation to the same sura. Al-Thaʿlabī's encyclopedic approach assures that the two were preserved.

⁴² Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kaṣf*, M107, fols. 73(b)–74(a).

⁴³ Ibid., M107, fol. 73(a).

C. Admonitory Discourse and Exegesis: Functional Hermeneutics

No other characteristic sets al-Thaʿlabī's hermeneutics apart more than the admonitory exegetical discourse that he weaves into the fabric of his work. The Qurʾān in these instances comes to life, speaks and admonishes. Exegesis in these instances performs a pragmatic function; it admonishes and exhorts the believers. Quranic exegesis is thus expanded to become functional exegesis, one of the primary reasons behind the popularity of al-Thaʿlabī's work in medieval Islam. Although I have chosen the word admonitory, I am in reality describing two complementary parts, one admonition the other exhortation, or what is known in Islamic pietistic literature as *tarhīb* (instilling fear) and *targhīb* (instilling hope). Al-Thaʿlabī did not wait for an admonitory verse to admonish; he did not wait for a balmy verse to spread good news; rather, any verse could become the occasion for a long sermon on a commendable virtue or a reprehensible vice. The various parts of the Qurʾān which spoke of the same moral topic were connected to each other; a certain verse about theft reminded al-Thaʿlabī of other verses concerning theft, and a verse that mentions lying is the occasion to remind the reader of verses about the punishment awaiting liars.

In interpreting verses 93:9–11 al-Thaʿlabī goes beyond the one-layered moral message of the verses and proceeds to transform them into a set of moral rules. Thus verse 93:9, “Therefore do not wrong (*taqhar*) the orphan” becomes the occasion to expound on the proper Islamic treatment of orphans. Compared to al-Ṭabarī before him, who only gave a one-word gloss for the word “*taqhar*”, al-Thaʿlabī's treatment is clearly founded on a different understanding of the aim and function of quranic hermeneutics.⁴⁴ Al-Thaʿlabī felt no need to gloss the word “*taqhar*” (to wrong, oppress), a rather common root; he was more interested in the reason and the lessons behind the appearance of such an injunction in a sura that was originally revealed to remind Muhammad of the many blessings that the Lord has bestowed upon him. According to al-Thaʿlabī, the verse was there to remind Muhammad of his orphanage (*wa-dhkur yutmaka*), with the implication that as an orphan himself, Muhammad should be more

⁴⁴ For al-Ṭabarī's interpretation, see his *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, v. 30: 233.

sensitive towards their plight.⁴⁵ Al-Tha'labī then proceeds to quote four different traditions (three prophetic and one non-prophetic) about the merit and rewards awaiting the individuals who properly treat an orphan. Through these traditions we come to learn how to treat an orphan and how to assuage his/her pains. The first has Muhammad stating that a guardian who treats an orphan properly will be in paradise with him. His position will be so great that his rank will barely be distinguishable from that of the prophet. The second tradition states that when an orphan cries, the throne of God shakes, causing God to ask his angels who was behind the orphan's distress. God does not fail to mention that the orphan has already suffered greatly; after all He Himself, as He points to the angels, has put the orphan's father underneath the ground. The angels answer that God knows better than they do; to this God replies: "Be my witness, whoever consoles this orphan and treats him well, shall be treated well on Judgment Day." Al-Tha'labī then relates a historical anecdote about the second caliph 'Umar who used to caress the heads of orphans and give them alms. The behavior of 'Umar is presented as an example of how to be kind to the orphans. The fourth tradition stems from the companion Anas b. Malik who says that the foster-father of an orphan will be spared hell as a reward for his financial generosity. Anas adds that carressing the head of an orphan is an act that will be rewarded in proportion to the number of hairs on the orphan's head.⁴⁶

The verse 93:9 was thus the occasion for a telling of the Islamic moral attitude to orphans (not the legal attitude, since that has been discussed by al-Tha'labī already).⁴⁷ The exegetical plane is thus expanded, not haphazardly but organically. The quranic verse itself contains an order to treat the orphans well. Yet it does not mention how and in what manner, and this is what was in need of elaboration. The surface meaning, the linguistic layer, was clear, but the moral message was terse and in need of explication.

Verse 93:10, "nor chide away the beggar" or "and as for the beggar, scold him not," a lucid verse both in meaning and diction, is simply rephrased by al-Ṭabarī into: "as for the one in need who asks you [for help] don't chide him, but feed him and help him."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Al-Tha'labī, *al-kashf*, M107, fol. 80(a).

⁴⁶ Ibid., M107, fol. 80(b).

⁴⁷ Ibid., M99 fol. 90(a-b).

⁴⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 233.

Al-Tha'labī's approach is markedly different. The moral message of the verse, the treatment of a beggar, has to be meticulously delineated; moreover, a new meaning for "beggar" is produced, rendering the verse richer and far more consequential in its moral import. In rephrasing the verse al-Tha'labī introduces a complication not found in the verse or in any previous interpretation. Al-Tha'labī writes: "as for the beggar don't rebuke, rather [give] a little offering or [if you can not], a gentle polite denial (*radd jamīl*), and remember [O Muhammad] your poverty".⁴⁹ Here is an elaboration of the word "chide" (*tanhar*) not seen before. The verse is not ordering Muslims to *give* to every beggar that asks, as al-Ṭabarī would have us believe, rather it is ordering Muslims not to *chide* or *rebuke*. Giving the beggar what he asks or kindly and politely turning him away is what God wants us to do. But al-Tha'labī is also aware of the special circumstances of this verse vis-à-vis Muhammad: according to al-Tha'labī God is, by asking Muhammad to be kind to the poor, reminding him of his earlier poverty. The verse seems thus to place a heavier demand on a Muslim who experienced a transformation in his economic situation. Such a Muslim should observe this injunction towards the poor all the more vigilantly.

Al-Tha'labī then offers a new interpretation for the word "beggar" (literally someone who asks, *sā'il*). It means a seeker of knowledge or a student (*ṭālib al-'ilm*), he states. The verse is, according to this interpretation, ordering the Muslims not to withhold knowledge from a student who asks for it and to offer it to him. This is, at first sight, a most unusual interpretation. How did a beggar turn into a student, and how was the injunction to be kind to beggars transformed into an Islamic pedagogical stand? Moreover, the authority from whom al-Tha'labī quotes this interpretation is rather adamant about it; he not only offers it, but rejects the common interpretation for the word (the meaning of beggar).⁵⁰ But what appears as unsupported interpretation is in reality based, without referring to it, on sura 80 where Muhammad is rebuked for not answering the query of a seeker of knowledge and God's guidance. This is a clear example of what I call the moral nexus of the Qur'ān that al-Tha'labī weaves. Verse 93:10 and sura 80 are both about decorous behavior towards seekers or pleaders of things they lack. They were thus connected and sura 80 influenced the interpretation of verse 93:10. The

⁴⁹ Al-Tha'labī, *al-kashf*, M107, fol. 80(b).

⁵⁰ *anmā annahu laysa bi-al-sā'il alladhī ya'tika wa-lākin ṭālib al-'ilm.*

reader who may think I am imagining an intra-textual connection that has no support in the text, or merely offering a plausible guess at best, need look no further than al-Razī's commentary.⁵¹ There the connection between the "beggar" of verse 93:10 as a seeker of knowledge and sura 80 is explicitly drawn.⁵² Indeed by al-Razī's time the exegetes wanted to emphasize this interpretation and not the first.

Another reason for interpreting the word "beggar" as student is al-Tha'labī's desire to connect the prophetic moral world—and by that I mean the moral injunction that has its origins in ḥadīth literature—to the quranic moral world. The order not to hide knowledge and to offer it to whomever asks for it has become a staple in the prophetic literature.⁵³ It is an injunction that has no counterpart in the Qur'ān. By reading in verse 93:10 an injunction to be generous to students, al-Tha'labī joins the two worlds (the Qur'ān and the Sunnah) and their mutual support is seen as axiomatic. Was not the *khulq* (moral behavior) of Muhammad the same as the Qur'ān?⁵⁴

Unsatisfied with the opinion of one authority, al-Tha'labī quotes another source that gives the same meaning for the verse, "if a student of knowledge comes to you don't turn him away."⁵⁵ Having dealt with this meaning, al-Tha'labī returns to the first interpretation and adduces a prophetic tradition that emphasizes the duty to give to someone who entreats us for something. In the tradition the prophet is quoted as saying that one should not hesitate to give to a beggar who asks for alms even if one sees two bullions of gold in

⁵¹ Al-Razī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, v. 31: 220.

⁵² One cannot emphasize enough the connection between the widespread practice of memorization of the Qur'ān and the subtlety of the intertextuality in medieval quranic exegesis. We should never forget that medieval Muslim exegetes memorized the whole of the Qur'ān and thus their intertextual networking was always functioning even when no sign of this process is manifest to the modern reader. Though I was certain of the connection between verse 93:10 and sura 80 and the new interpretation, I felt that I needed to support my analysis with an example from a medieval Qur'ān commentator who made the connection explicit. That was not difficult to find; after a casual look at some Qur'ān commentaries I came across al-Rāzī. The study of medieval Qur'ān exegesis will not go far if we don't realize the implication of the memorization of the Qur'ān on the approach of the medieval exegete and hence on the medieval exegetical approach as a whole.

⁵³ See A.J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la Tradition musulmane*, v. 4: 332: *bāb karāhīyat man' al-'ilm, bāb faḍl nashr al-'ilm*.

⁵⁴ That Muhammad's moral character was founded on quranic principles has become a truism in the Islamic ethical structure. When asked about his conduct 'Ā'ishah simply said: *kāna khuluquh al-Qur'ān*, his moral conduct was the same as the Qur'ān.

⁵⁵ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 81(a).

the beggar's palms. Al-Tha'labī then produces two statements by a famous ascetic, Ibrāhīm b. Adham, who marvels at the beggars and how much good they bring to the Muslims, since "they carry our good deeds with them to the other world." Indeed, according to Ibrāhīm beggars are our messengers to our relatives in the other world.⁵⁶ Notice that the prophetic tradition and the statements of Ibrāhīm are not direct interpretations of the verse; they neither explain its words nor elaborate on its structure. They simply add to our understanding of how a Muslim should go about giving alms. Does one give to a rich-looking beggar? What is the benefit from such an act? It is the moral message that is being explained, the way one should behave.

Finally, a prophetic ḥadīth is adduced by al-Tha'labī which specifies how many times a Muslim has to politely turn away a beggar before resorting to chiding or rebuking. The prophet is supposed to have said that one can chide away a beggar after three consecutive polite refusals. This is a remarkable tradition to adduce here; it has the apparent effect of morally negating the very verse it is explaining. But one has to remember that functional exegesis uses the quranic verses as the trigger for an exposition of Muslim norms. This kind of exegesis is not about explaining the linguistic syntax, rather it is about explaining the moral syntax. How one treats the beggars is what al-Tha'labī makes clear here. Muslim moral codes were always practical; how to go about treating beggars involves, in addition to moral considerations, normative social attitudes to begging and the extent to which one was willing to tolerate them.

Verse 93:11, "and as for thy Lord's blessing, declare it," presents al-Tha'labī with a difficult problem. It was not clear to al-Tha'labī whether the verse was referring to Muhammad alone or all the Muslims. Unlike the previous two verses where the injunctions addressed to Muhammad could be easily understood to have general applicability, the blessing here could only refer to something given to Muhammad specifically; thus the act of declaring a blessing seems to be reserved for Muhammad to do. Al-Tha'labī has at some point to address the issue of the applicability of the verse to the general public of the Muslims.

⁵⁶ Ibid., M107, fol. 81(a). Ibrāhīm means that by giving alms with the intention of asking God to give the benefit to our dead relatives, these beggars are like postmen who carry these good tidings to the intended deceased relatives.

Al-Tha'labī first offers the interpretation given by al-Ṭabarī where the blessing is taken to mean prophethood (*al-nubuwwah*).⁵⁷ He then adds another interpretation not found in al-Ṭabarī: the blessing meant here is the Qur'ān. Having offered these two interpretations al-Tha'labī then states that "the ruling (*ḥukm*) of this verse covers all the blessings." Thus al-Tha'labī wants to make clear that Muslims are also ordered to declare all the blessings given to them and that the rule of the verse is general. Apparently, Muslims from an early date came to understand this verse in general terms, as applicable to them also and not restricted to Muhammad. Al-Ṭabarī has preserved this early view in his commentary. He states—after having finished his interpretation of this verse—that "Muslims used to think that part of thanksgiving for blessings is to declare the blessings themselves" (*kāna al-muslimūn yarawna anna min shukr al-ni'am an yuhaddath bi-hā*).⁵⁸ It is clear from the wording that al-Ṭabarī sees this reading of the verse as reflective of a kind of popular religiosity that seeks to apply the Qur'ān even where not applicable. Hermeneutically speaking, al-Ṭabarī saw this verse as restricted to Muhammad. Al-Tha'labī, on the other hand is determined to accord the popular interpretation a central position in the explication of this verse. To him the verse entails a ruling, an injunction, a *ḥukm*. Muslims have to give thanks to blessings by declaring and talking about them. The popular understanding of the verse entailing a moral injunction to offer thanksgiving which was on the periphery of al-Ṭabarī's treatment, is moved to the center by al-Tha'labī. Giving thanks for blessings is what the verse is about; it is not an act restricted to Muhammad.

Al-Tha'labī then relates the story of a certain 'Abd Allāh b. Ghālib who seemed to brag about every little detail of the blessings he received. He would say to his friends, "God gave me good blessings, and I prayed yesterday, and I did this and that." Scandalized, his friends would point out that a person of his stature should not be so uncouth and should not relate these details. To that he would retort by quoting verse 93:11. Al-Tha'labī then quotes two prophetic traditions that make the public disclosure of God's blessings central to the act of thanksgiving. Al-Tha'labī is thus tying together the two most important Muslim sources of behaviour, the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, and creating a moral unit out of them. Indeed the second

⁵⁷ Ibid., M107, fol. 81(a); al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 233.

⁵⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 234.

prophetic tradition is a sweeping declaration about thanksgiving and the importance of being publicly grateful as a cohesive force that binds Muslims together.

So far I have given examples of admonitory exegesis in which the prophetic traditions, the Sunnah, are the main interpretive tool. This type of admonitory prophetic interpretation is the most common in al-Tha'labī's work. But there is another type of admonitory exegesis, or what I would call the wisdomatic exegesis, in which wisdom literature plays the central role. A good example of this wisdomatic exegesis is al-Tha'labī's interpretation of verse 57:20. The verse reads as follows:

Know that the present life is but a sport and a diversion, an adornment and a cause for boasting among you, and a rivalry in wealth and children. It is as a rain whose vegetation pleases the unbelievers; then it withers, and thou seest it turning yellow, then it becomes broken orts. And in the world to come there is a terrible chastisement, and forgiveness from God and good pleasure; and the present life is but the joy of delusion.

Al-Tha'labī, after offering the interpretation that has already been advanced by al-Ṭabarī,⁵⁹ quotes from a contemporary exegete (*ba'd al-muta'awwilīn min al-muta'akhkhirīn*) who elaborates the theme of this-world-as-diversion. By quoting from a contemporary authority, al-Tha'labī allows the Qur'ān to remain a living document that evokes reaction from its audience. He does not privilege the early authorities over latecomers and each is accorded a place in his commentary. The tone of this interpretation is pessimistic and evokes the wisdom literature popular among the literati circles of high Islamic culture:

Sport like the sports that kids indulge in, and a diversion like diversions of the adolescents, and adornment like women's adornment, and a boasting like the boastings of equals (*agrān*), and rivalry like the rivalry of the *Dihqāns*.⁶⁰ Alī b. Ṭālib said one day to 'Ammār: 'Don't be sad over this world, for the world is made up of six things only: food, drinks, cloth, perfume, means of transportation, and sex. Honey which is the best of this world's food is the spit of a fly; water which is its best drink is something all beasts drink [humans are thus not distinguished from animals in this regard]; silk which the best of its garments is the weave of a worm; the best of its fragrance, musk, is the blood of a mouse; the best of its rides are the horses and men are

⁵⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 27: 232.

⁶⁰ The *dihqān* are the landed aristocracy of the Persian-conquered Muslim territories.

killed on horses' backs; and the best sex is with women and it is all urine in urine [pointing to the fact that women urinate from the same place they are penetrated]. By God a woman will adorn herself only to hide her ugliest part."⁶¹

This passage is not only alien to the tradition of quranic exegesis as we know it before al-Tha'labī, but is more a part of wisdom literature that filled *adab* works.⁶²

Thus far I have advanced the claim that al-Tha'labī's work not only shares certain features with *adab* works, but that al-Tha'labī quoted from these works and was aware of their content. This claim is not based on the similarity between the subject matter of the two alone, but can be substantiated by al-Tha'labī's method of quoting. Al-Tha'labī refers on many occasions to sayings of the *ḥukamā'* (wise men, philosophers), or more often to aphorisms from *al-ḥikmah* (wisdom, philosophy).⁶³ He thus leaves no doubt as to where he was copying from and to whom he owes this kind of material.

In his commentary on verse 94:6–5, sections of which we have already touched upon in the section on philology and exegesis, al-Tha'labī finishes his long interpretation with a large selection of poetry and adages—yet another characteristic feature of his admonitory exegesis in which poetry and short aphorisms are heavily used to enlarge the scope of the meaning of the verse in question. Explaining the two verses here becomes an excuse for elaborating on the theme of patience and hope in God. Al-Tha'labī relates both a prophetic tradition and a selection of six poetic citations on the same theme.⁶⁴ The structure of this wisdom pericope is the same as an *adab* wisdom piece, where a theme is elaborated through prose and poetry. In all, the effect is remarkable; the piece is a mirror image of secular *adab* literature. Indeed one could argue that al-Tha'labī was performing the equivalent of sacralization of secular *adab* literary styles.

Moreover, poetry in these instances is not used as a philological tool—we should not forget that poetry was only used in quranic exegesis as part of a philological argument—but for admonition, advice and edification. This is a radical departure in the method of quranic

⁶¹ Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M106, fol. 68(a).

⁶² On wisdom and *adab* see the article of Dimitri Gutas, "Classical Arabic Wisdom Literature: Nature and Scope," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101 (1981): 49–86.

⁶³ When interpreting verse 100:6 al-Tha'labī starts a quotation by saying "*wa-fi al-ḥikmah*." See *al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 140(b).

⁶⁴ Ibid., M107, fols. 84(a)–85(a).

interpretation. Poetry is readmitted into the sacred discourse, not as a sanitized philological tool where the meaning of the poetic citation as such is inconsequential, but as a content-poetry, a poetry that can buttress the word of God. The old struggle between poetry and Qur'ān for the heart of a Muslim is thus nullified. For the first time the Muslim reader is asked, in the very domain of the sacred language of the Qur'ān, to look at poetry not as a linguistic grammatical structure but as the carrier of the same message as that of the Qur'ān. Hence this is a moment of cultural reconciliation between two currents in the Arabo-Islamic culture. The *adab*'s claim and the claim of the secular encyclopedias over wisdom are here reconciled with the claims of the devout-minded Muslims who saw the Qur'ān as the sole repository of such wisdom. The secular and the sacred are mixed in al-Tha'labī's commentary, and the impact on the nature of Qur'ān commentaries was profound.

This functional exegetical approach to the Qur'ān caused a radical transformation in the nature of quranic exegesis. The word of God was not only explained but was expanded to become an authoritative moral voice in regulating human conduct. Furthermore, functional exegesis created what I would call a dialogical Qur'ān—a Qur'ān with which the believers conversed and argued. Finally, because the admonitory discourse is one based on a creative tension between despair and hope—the wrath of God being inseparable from His mercy—al-Tha'labī saw grace everywhere that he saw retribution. The two poles of Islamic the admonitory paradigm, the *tarhīb* (engendering fear) and the *targhīb* (engendering hope) are not far apart in al-Tha'labī's admonitory readings of the Qur'ān.

An ideal example of how al-Tha'labī turned the Qur'ān into a dialogical text and a hope-generating text is the interpretation of verse 82:6 "O Man! What deceived thee as to thy generous Lord?" Before presenting al-Tha'labī's interpretation of this verse, I would like to offer the reader a look at what al-Ṭabarī has to say on this verse, in order to show how admonitory exegesis radically changed the face of quranic interpretation. Al-Ṭabarī does not offer an interpretation of 82:6, perhaps because the verse is deceptively clear. Rather, he offers an answer to the rhetorical question posed. The devil, asserts al-Ṭabarī, is the one who deceived human beings.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 30: 87.

Nothing more is added, this being once more an example of the non-dialogical Qur'ān that al-Ṭabarī creates. The rhetorical question asked by God, is, as it were, silenced. Yet a rhetorical question is asked not merely to be answered, but to create a crisis, a moment of reflection, to provoke a multitude of answers. The one answer presented by al-Ṭabarī—and it is categorically one answer—kills any movement that the question tries to create. Needless to say, the answer of al-Ṭabarī has dogmatic implications. It might imply that man, as a deceived creature, is less culpable, more a victim and less an agent. The devil is presented as the cause of our delusions.

The rhetorical question asked by God, "O Man! What deceived thee as to thy generous Lord?", on the other hand, is transformed by al-Tha'labī's interpretation into one of the most moving dialogues between man and God in the history of quranic interpretation. Through this verse man is made aware of the infinite mercy of God. The question does not beget an answer only, it begets knowledge of an essence of God, his generosity towards his subjects.

Al-Tha'labī starts by quoting a prophetic tradition that states that one day Muhammad recited this verse and answered God's question about man by saying, "his ignorance" (*jahluh*).⁶⁶ Al-Tha'labī then quotes the same tradition found in al-Ṭabarī that says that the deceiver was the devil. Notice that al-Tha'labī brings together two diametrically opposite answers, one that has the devil as the culprit, and another that has human ignorance as the cause. This he does without giving preference to either. The two explanations are the earliest traditions we have regarding this verse.

Having finished with the earliest stratum of interpretation, al-Tha'labī moves to record the reaction of the believers to this question. The question in this verse is being treated as if it will be asked, a reality; someday God will indeed ask human beings this very question; it is not a rhetorical flourish on the part of the Qur'ān made to illustrate a point. Al-Fuḍayl b. 'Iyād was asked about what he would say on Judgement Day if he were asked by God as to what deceived him. Al-Fuḍayl answered that he would say: "I was deceived by your [God's] long hanging curtains."⁶⁷ By that he meant that God overlooks human mistakes and forgives them by covering their

⁶⁶ Al-Tha'labī, *al-kashf*, M107, fol. 49a.

⁶⁷ Ibid., M107, fol. 49a; *gharranī sūtūruk al-murakkhāt*. There is no study that I know of that discusses the sartorial language of God's forgiveness in Islam.

sins by His long-garmented mercy. This answer was versified by a poet and made into two lines of poetry which al-Tha'labī quotes. Once again poetry, non-philologically oriented poetry, is used to serve admonitory exegesis. Indeed, its use in the admonitory sections is almost mandatory. Al-Tha'labī then quotes Muqātil, who says that man was deceived by the fact that God did not visit the transgressors with a swift punishment in this world. Thus they were deluded in thinking that God is not going to act on His threats. Al-Sarī b. Mughallis, on the other hand, is quoted saying that man was deceived by God's compassion (*riḡ*).

Al-Tha'labī then quotes the reaction of several mystics to the question in this verse. The first to be quoted is Yahyā b. Mu'ādh who said that should he be asked by God as to what deceived him, he would answer that God's benevolence (*birr*) deceived him. Another mystic is quoted as saying that it is God's forbearance (*hilm*). Abū Bakr al-Warrāq meanwhile would answer that it is God's generosity (*karam*) that deceived him. This suggestion would seem to indicate that the mystics had, by al-Tha'labī's time, come to the conclusion that the very wording of the question was indicative of how one should answer it. According to the people of allusions (*ahl al-ishārah*, as al-Tha'labī calls the mystics) God used the word "generous" (thy generous God) in this verse to indicate to the believers that they should answer that God's generosity is what deceived them.

Al-Tha'labī then quotes the companion Ibn Mas'ūd who states that each human being will have a private audience with his Lord and will be asked as to what deceived him in God and what he did with the knowledge he acquired regarding God, and what was his response to the message of the prophets. Thus this verse constitutes part of the Muslim conception of accountability. It is tied with the final judgment and the day of reckoning that awaits every Muslim. One of the most important effects of admonitory exegesis is its synthetic effect, by which disparate aspects of Islamic and quranic elements are united into one nexus and one moral world.

Al-Tha'labī finishes his interpretation of verse 82:6 by dampening the thrust of the optimistic interpretation he has so far presented. Dhū al-Nūn is quoted as saying that many deceived persons are themselves unaware that God is simply waiting for the day of reckoning to administer his punishment. Finally, al-Tha'labī adduces two lines of poetry on the same theme as Dhū al-Nūn's statement. Thus a balance is struck between complete reliance on God's benevolence

and magnanimity and his long-suffering patience before He administers punishment.

Al-Tha'labī's interpretation of this verse permanently affected the way subsequent commentators dealt with it. They either copied his interpretation, modified it, or simply refuted it. By directing our gaze to the salvific aspect of this verse and connecting it with issues of forgiveness and absolving of sins, al-Tha'labī raised issues that were bound to attract the attention of the subsequent exegetes. Indeed, exegesis of this passage after al-Tha'labī proved to be impossible without addressing the issues he raised. This is one more confirmation that his method proved to be the most influential in the history of the exegetical tradition after the work of al-Ṭabarī. Al-Zamakhsharī, writing under the shadow of al-Tha'labī, felt obliged to give a disproportionate amount of attention to this verse. Indeed a third of his interpretation of sura 82 went to this verse, an ironic reversal from the scant attention it was given by al-Ṭabarī. Al-Zamakhsharī, in addressing verse 82:6, feels compelled to undo al-Tha'labī's interpretation of this verse because of its salvific implications; he ridicules the notion that God phrased this verse so as to teach human beings how to find excuses for their transgressions, calling the people who advocate such readings *quṣṣāṣ al-ḥashawīyah*, storytellers of the nonsense.

The admonitory exegetical material is not always lengthy; rather the manner of this method is concision, usually accomplished by citing one prophetic tradition as the moral elaboration for a certain verse. In commenting on verse 96:6, "No indeed; surely Man waxes insolent," al-Tha'labī quotes one prophetic tradition that has the prophet praying for refuge from poverty that breeds heedlessness and richness that breeds insolence.⁶⁸ On the whole, in al-Tha'labī's view, the Qur'ān was translatable into a moral code for an upright Muslim life. The implication of 'Ā'ishah's hadith that Muhammad's moral life was based on the Qur'ān (*kāna khuluquh al-Qur'ān*) meant that the explication of the Qur'ān should show this moral aspect.

D. Political Interpretations

The schism that ripped the nascent Muslim community after the regicide of the caliph 'Uthmān was never healed. The assassination

⁶⁸ Ibid., M107, fol. 122(a).

also precipitated the first theological-political debates among the Muslims. Questions like "who is a true believer, and who deserves to lead the community and what assures salvation" were at the center of these debates. Moreover, the first Muslim generation, by dint of their involvement in these debates, became also the symbol of many different theological-political positions. In many instances the name of a companion came to be used as a shorthand reference to a political stance years after the death of that companion. Eventually the disputes left an indelible mark on the whole spectrum of Islamic intellectual articulations, including quranic exegesis. Exegetical material that refers to any of the four Caliphs, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn (grandchildren of Muhammad), Muhammad's wives,⁶⁹ his daughter Fāṭima, and the different clans of Quraysh is primarily political interpretation of the Qur'ān.⁷⁰ Encoded in these interpretations is the merit of the political-theological party that the eponym represents. Indeed, the Qur'ān as the central document of the Muslim community, was the most politically interpreted (not to say contested) text in early Islamic history. Each party saw to it that certain verses were understood to refer to the companion it championed; each scurried to introduce its interpretations into the mainstream of the exegetical tradition.

In al-Tha'labī's commentary we find side by side many politically interpreted verses both of Shī'ī and Sunnī leaning. But as I intend to show in this section, the incorporation of Shī'ī material was not done without radically changing the very implication of that material. I shall argue that this act of al-Tha'labī should be understood in the general context of his own work as I have presented it here, and thus in isolation from how later Sunnī and Shī'ī theologians understood the presence of this material in his commentary. Shī'ī polemicists made heavy use of al-Tha'labī's commentary and its pro-Shī'ī traditions against the Sunnī. The book thus became too embarrassing to elements of the Sunnī camp who were engaged in anti-Shī'ī polemics; jettisoning the work was the best option to cut losses. An orchestrated attempt was launched by Ibn Taymīyah to undermine the reputation of al-Tha'labī's work, an effort which ultimately drove

⁶⁹ The wives of Muhammad are mentioned more than once in the Qur'ān in reference to certain rules (sexual and social). These verses I will discuss here.

⁷⁰ In this sense I do see the Qur'ān as preserving material from the pre-caliphate period.

the work out of circulation. Indeed, the unavailability of the work to modern scholars, despite its foundational importance to the history of the exegetical tradition, is a reflection of the success of this campaign.⁷¹ The work was eventually deemed unreliable and thus unfit for publication.

Despite my agreement with the scholarly convention of classifying certain interpretations of many verses in the Qur'ān as "political" or "sectarian," in fact the number of verses in the Qur'ān that could entertain plausible political interpretations without doing violence to them are scarce, a meager one or two verses at the utmost.⁷² Hence, the incorporation of political interpretation in quranic exegesis was only plausible through what I have called the "fictive narrative" technique. But before showing how this worked on the wide range of such verses, commonly called political, in al-Tha'labī's commentary, let us look at the two verses, 33:33 and 42:23, if only because their wording was so closely tied with later political phraseology. Verse 33:33 is significant because it has the phrase "People of the House" (*ahl al-bayt*) in reference to Muhammad's household, the only such occurrence in the Qur'ān.⁷³ The phrase has of course become the shibboleth of the Shī'ī. It has come to signify the descendants of Muhammad through Fāṭima and 'Alī; implicit in the term also was a privilege that was at the heart of the Shī'ī ideology. Finding a quranic basis for the use of the term as the Shī'ī use it would, of course, add considerably to the validity of their religious claims. The question inevitably arises, then, what the phrase means in the Qur'ān in this particular verse. Verse 33:33 reads, "Remain (wives of Muhammad) in your houses; and display not your finery as did the pagans of old. And perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and obey God

⁷¹ For the history of the reception of the work in Shī'ī circles see Chapter Seven.

⁷² These are: 33:33 and 42:23, with verse 9:40 a possible third, depending on how far one is willing to go in giving significance to the word *ṣāhib*, companion. Shī'ī and Sunnī claim that other verses refer to their favorite companions but there is nothing in the verses they cite to support such claims. Cf. with Goldziher: "Wenn man dieselben betrachtet, wird man in den wenigsten" (wie etwa in 33 v. 33; 42 v. 23) zur Not einen Anhaltspunkt für alidenfreundliche Auslegung finden können. Nur durch daran geknüpfte Tendenzhadīth werden sie für dieselbe geeigne, mit dem Resultat, dass "die Liebe für die Prophetenfamilie zur Vollkommenheit des Glaubens gehöre" in *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), 299. It is somehow curious that Goldziher did not analyze the different interpretations of these two verses.

⁷³ The phrase occurs in another verse but in reference to another prophet, see Qur'ān 11:73.

and his Messenger. People of the House, God only desires to put away from you abomination and to cleanse you." The verse leaves no doubt that it was Muhammad's household, then consisting of his wives, that was meant by the phrase 'people of the house'. It is a point that does not need belaboring. But that is not the only possible reading according to the exegetical tradition. Let us take a close look at the interpretations of al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī and compare and analyze their approaches.

Al-Ṭabarī offers two possible interpretations for the expression *ahl al-bayt*.⁷⁴ The first is that the phrase refers to Muhammad, Fāṭima, 'Alī, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn, known as the five. In support of this interpretation, al-Ṭabarī adduces sixteen traditions of varying length and provenance. They leave little doubt about their pro-Shī'ī nature. Some are blatantly forthcoming with their love of 'Alī and indictment of his detractors. The traditions are lengthy, hammering the point relentlessly and effectively. The second possible meaning offered by al-Ṭabarī is that the phrase 'people of the house' refers exclusively to the wives of Muhammad. This interpretation is not only anti-Shī'ī since it tries to replace a Shī'ī interpretation, but is also pro-Sunnī since it defends the wives of Muhammad, including the controversial 'Ā'ishah. Unlike the first meaning, only one ḥadīth is cited by al-Ṭabarī in support of this second interpretation, which, it should be emphasized here, is placed at the end of the 16 three-page long ḥadīths, thus radically minimizing its effect. Al-Ṭabarī is suspiciously silent afterwards; departing from his habit of telling us which of the *ta'wīl* is the right one, he offers no comment whatsoever.⁷⁵ Of course it is clear from the sheer number of the ḥadīths adduced in support of the first interpretation, and the last minute offer of a second meaning, that he thinks highly of the first. It is possible that the majority of scholars at al-Ṭabarī's time understood the phrase to refer to 'Alī and his descendants through Fāṭima.⁷⁶ It

⁷⁴ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 22: 6-8.

⁷⁵ See below for an example of what I mean by al-Ṭabarī's editorial comments.

⁷⁶ Al-Zamakhsharī omits any mention of this meaning since by then *ahl al-bayt* meant Muhammad and the aforementioned four. What he does is point to the case ending of the phrase that clearly indicates that Muhammad's wives were part of the people of the house. This is rather a brilliant compromise: *ahl al-bayt* is both 'Alī's descendants through Fāṭima and Muhammad's wives at the same time. See *al-kashshāf*, v. 3: 236. Cf. with al-Qurṭubī where the harmonization is fully articulated. In both al-Zamakhsharī and al-Qurṭubī there is a remarkable downplaying of the traditions that support the pro-Shī'ī interpretation exclusively; if not omitted (as in al-Zamakhsharī) they are watered down to one ḥadīth only (as is in al-Qurṭubī).

would be wrong to issue any judgments about al-Ṭabarī's political stand from his treatment of this verse alone. A more detailed study has to be conducted before we can understand his position vis-à-vis the political debates of Sunnism and Shi'ism. Certainly, one cannot declare him a Shi'ī sympathizer because he gives prominence to a pro-Shi'ī interpretation without further support and investigation.

Al-Tha'labī's commentary on this verse completely reverses al-Ṭabarī's.⁷⁷ Not only does he start by giving the second meaning of al-Ṭabarī's first but he offers five traditions to support it. The phrase, *ahl al-bayt*, states al-Tha'labī, refers exclusively to Muhammad's wives. This meaning is further supported through philological arguments. By redirecting the gaze of the reader to the grammatical structure of the phrase and most importantly to its context—by pointing to the fact that the sentence after the phrase refers to Muhammad's wives also—al-Tha'labī buttresses this interpretation through a method (philology) that is difficult to refute, something he will not do for the second meaning.⁷⁸ Moreover, one of the traditions cited starts by rejecting the common meaning given to the phrase without stating what the common meaning was, implying that its tendentiousness is in proportion to its fame (*laysa alladhī tadhhabūn ilayh*). Another not only insists that it refers to *all* the wives of Muhammad but also adds that “and no male was included with them” (*ya'nī nisā' al-nabī kullahunna wa-laysa ma'ahunna rajulun*) leaving no doubt that 'Alī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn were never meant to be included in this phrase. Those belonging to the camp that saw this phrase as referring to the wives of Muhammad were not only stationed first by al-Tha'labī but they were allowed to refute the other interpretation before it was even mentioned or named, a snub hard not to notice.

The meaning of the phrase ‘people of the house’ as the five (Muhammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn) is the second meaning presented by al-Tha'labī. Five traditions are cited in support of this statement, a remarkable decrease from the 16 of al-Ṭabarī's. No philological arguments are given in support of this reading either. A numerical balance is thus struck between the two main competing interpretations—an implicit reprimand for al-Ṭabarī, no doubt. The equalization

⁷⁷ *Al-Kashf*, III Ahmet 76/3 (Topkapi Saray) fols. 139(b)–140(b).

⁷⁸ Al-Zamakhsharī picks up on the grammatical angle and makes it the center of his interpretation. I should state here that he does use a different grammatical point to support his view.

in the number of traditions could be seen as a hermeneutical détente between the two competing sects on the meaning of the phrase.

Had al-Tha'labī stopped here he would have achieved more than any of the exegetes had or would ever achieve. By presenting the material in the manner in which he did, he poised the verse between two meanings almost equally, notwithstanding the slight bias al-Tha'labī evinces for the Sunnī reading, though he was lucky since philology was on his side. He nevertheless did more, preserving for us two additional interpretations of the phrase championed by two other competing factions, thus effectively closing the circle of possible contested readings for this important slogan-phrase. Al-Tha'labī states that some commentators said that the phrase ‘people of the house’ refers to the clan of Hāshim, the Banū Hāshim, including the clan of 'Abbās among others. This is no doubt a pro-Abbasid tradition; the Abbasids officially saw themselves as the true inheritors of Muhammad's legacy, since they were from the Banū Hāshim and consequently from the People of the House. Finally, al-Tha'labī offers a tradition that gives the prestige and significance of the term ‘people of the house’ to Muhammad's genealogy, his ancestors and not to his descendants. Probably this is a Kharijite tradition, but we will never be certain. Al-Tha'labī has thus faithfully preserved four different competing and contradictory interpretations of this phrase. He was both anthological and careful to allow the text a polyvalent voice.

Before issuing any conclusions about the position of al-Tha'labī regarding the political import of the Qur'ān, I will analyze verse 42:23 and continue to highlight the difference between al-Tha'labī's exegesis and that of al-Ṭabarī. The verse states: “That is the good tidings God gives to His servants, who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: ‘I do not ask of you a wage for this [prophetic mission], except love for the kinsfolk (*illā al-mawaddah fī al-qurbā*); and whosoever gains a good deed, We shall give him increase of good in respect of it. Surely God is All-forgiving, All-thankful.” The phrase “love for the kinsfolk” has understandably become a lightning rod in a political atmosphere where blood relationship to Muhammad was seen by one faction as a qualification for leadership. Al-Ṭabarī has four possible meanings for this phrase.⁷⁹ The first is that Muhammad was asking his tribe Quraysh, during his Meccan period, to respect the blood ties that bind them together. This is not only given first but

⁷⁹ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 25: 23–26.

it is also the interpretation that has the largest number of traditions to support it. The second takes this phrase to mean that one should love and honor the relatives of Muhammad (the pro-Shī'ī interpretation), the third that one should love and honor God by doing good deeds,⁸⁰ the fourth that one should love one's own relatives. Having finished listing these different interpretations, al-Ṭabarī furnishes his own analysis of why the first interpretation is the most valid (*awlā al-aqwāl fī dhālika bi-al-ṣawāb wa-ashbahuhā bi-ẓāhir al-ta'wīl*). The arguments are persuasive, cogent and incisive. This is vintage al-Ṭabarī, and his opinion about which of the interpretations of the verse is the valid one is difficult to refute. It is not clear why al-Ṭabarī omitted to carry out a similar analysis with verse 33:33, where he appears to be pro-Shī'ī, whereas he gives us in verse 42:23 an analysis which is squarely anti-Shī'ī in its import, insofar as it deprives the Shī'ī of their chance to use the verse to their advantage. It is important to keep in mind that verse 42:23 is more ambiguous and far more confusing than the straightforward 33:33. Be that as it may be, let us move to al-Tha'labī and see what he has to say on verse 42:23.

Al-Tha'labī offers a far more elaborate interpretation for verse 42:23, one that has preserved more of the debates surrounding this verse than al-Ṭabarī did, albeit with the omission of al-Ṭabarī's fourth interpretation.⁸¹ Furthermore, al-Tha'labī does not voice his opinion regarding which among the interpretations he offers is the most valid (more on this point later). He also omits any philological arguments in favor of any of the interpretations. What al-Tha'labī manages to achieve though, is to unmask the political strife over the meaning of this verse by dropping any veil of naiveté about what was at stake here. Although unwilling to choose one of the interpretations as his favorite he is adamantly against any limitation imposed on its possible meanings. Let us glance at how he presented the material regarding verse 34:23.

Al-Tha'labī presents two different reasons behind the revelation of this verse. The first has the Medinese supporters of Muhammad (*al-anṣār*) collecting money to help the newly arrived prophet; when they presented the money to him this verse was revealed. That this is a politically biased story is not difficult to prove. The *anṣār* or the Medinese camp are presented as the true supporters of Muhammad,

⁸⁰ The term "*qurbā*" is thus taken to mean physical proximity and not kinship.
⁸¹ *Al-Kāshf*, M105, fols. 64(b)–68(b).

unlike his tribe Quraysh. Yet we are not told what exactly the phrase (*al-mawaddah fī al-qurbā*) means. The implication is that the Medinese helpers respected the kinship ties that bound them to Muhammad. Although this is not stated, but any medieval reader would be aware of the genealogical tree of Muhammad and the fact that the Medinese were his maternal uncles. The second possible reason al-Tha'labī gives for the revelation of this verse was that the Meccan pagans were wondering whether Muhammad wanted money or compensation for his prophetic activity. This verse was revealed to tell them that Muhammad did not want money but only "that they should love him because of his kinship with them." Here al-Tha'labī expresses a guarded preference for the second story since the verse was a Meccan verse and should refer to the Meccans and not the Medinese.⁸²

These are not the explanations of the phrase (*al-mawaddah fī al-qurbā*) though, and al-Tha'labī proceeds to tell us that the scholars have disagreed over the meaning of the verse. Once more al-Tha'labī gives the least favored of al-Ṭabarī's interpretations first, although here not to emphasize it so much as to prepare us for the last and most important one. According to authorities that al-Tha'labī quotes, the phrase meant that one should love and honor God by doing good deeds. The second meaning offered by al-Tha'labī is that Quraysh should honor and love Muhammad because of the kinship that binds the two. Finally, it means that one should honor and love Muhammad's relatives (*qarābatī wa-ʿitrātī*). Al-Tha'labī then informs us that there has been a disagreement about the identity of the relatives of Muhammad that one is supposed to love and honor. Here we see a different approach than that of al-Ṭabarī to the problem of what the phrase means. While in al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of the phrase that says that one should love Muhammad's relatives, the relatives explicitly meant his descendants through Fāṭima, the case is not apparently so in al-Tha'labī's interpretation. That the phrase could mean that one should love Muhammad's relatives and honor them does not automatically mean that the identity of those relatives is already known. Though al-Tha'labī is willing to accept the former interpretation, he is not willing to forgo the fact that we need to ascertain which relatives were meant. Al-Tha'labī then gives different possibilities for the identity of those relatives. The relatives

⁸² Unlike al-Ṭabarī, who, when expressing his preference, uses expressions like, *awlā bi-al-ṣawāb*, al-Tha'labī uses the term *ashbah* (likely). See, *ibid.* fol. 65(a) line 12.

meant were, according to one camp, 'Alī and Fāṭima and their children. Al-Tha'labī cites several traditions in support of this argument. Two of the traditions cited are most unusual in so far as they are not direct interpretations at all. One has the engraved words of Muhammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥusayn b. 'Alī's seal. The words string together the names of the most recognized line of Imams among the Shī'ī, 'Alī, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, but have no direct bearing on the subject at hand, unless we are to understand that this line of descendants is the line due the honor.⁸³ Then comes what has to be the most unusual poetic citation one could encounter in a Sunnī quranic commentary. The line of poetry states that "if my love of a five by whom my religious obligations are more sanctified, and the hatred of those who fight them is a *rafḍ* (the root of the name of Shī'ī given to them by the Sunnīs) then I am a Shī'ī (a *rāfiḍī*)."⁸⁴ It is here in this statement where a Sunnī is declaring himself a Shī'ī, that we see for the first time the issue of Shī'ism and the love of the "People of the House" being addressed head-on by a Sunnī commentator. The love of the descendants of Muhammad is, according to al-Tha'labī, also a Sunnī virtue, and if that love is the only doctrine that differentiates a Sunnī from a Shī'ī, then al-Tha'labī is saying that all the Sunnīs are Shī'ī because they love and honor these people.

The introduction of Shī'ī interpretative material into the mainstream of the exegetical tradition by al-Tha'labī was thus not an act of subterfuge by which pro-Shī'ī material was insinuated into the Sunnī. It was certainly not an oversight, a persistent gathering of Shī'ī material that somehow was done inadvertently. Al-Tha'labī saw nothing Shī'ī in loving the family of Muhammad and his descendants; the love of *ahl al-bayt* constituted a *tazkiyah* act, a sort of purification and valediction of one's faith. It was as Sunnī an act as any other. Thus al-Tha'labī was, by incorporating Shī'ī material in his commentary, robbing it of any Shī'ī significance and making it part of the Sunnī worldview. Pro-Shī'ī material in a Sunnī context is not pro-Shī'ī after all. It is in this context that we have to understand the pro-Shī'ī material in al-Tha'labī's work, and not as a naive act of gathering everything available on the Qur'ān, as Ibn Taymīyah

⁸³ The words on the seal are: *ḥannī bi-Allāh ḥasan wa-bi-al-nabī al-mu'taman, wa-bi-al-waṣī dhī al-mīnān, wa-bi-al-Ḥusayn wa-al-Ḥasan.*

⁸⁴ *in kān ḥubbi khamsatan zakat biḥim farā'idī—wa-bughḍu man 'ādāhum rafḍan fa innī rāfiḍī*, see *al-Kashf*, M105, fol. 66(b).

would like us to believe. The pro-Shī'ī material was thus declawed insofar as it need not imply a hatred for the other companions of Muhammad or an explicit hierarchization of the merits of Muhammad's successors, with his relatives on a rank higher than that of the first three caliphs. As long as a Sunnī theologian does not subscribe to the Imāmī doctrine, then no amount of love to the *ahl al-bayt*, excessive as it may be, would turn him into a Shī'ī or decrease his Sunnism.

Indeed al-Tha'labī, unlike his predecessor al-Ṭabarī, was willing to use invectives against the Shī'ī, or the "rejectionist" (*rawāfiḍ*) as he would like to refer to them, consistently denigrating and upbraiding them for their unholy hatred for Muhammad's early companions. His tolerance stopped on the periphery of the recognized Sunnī circle. Take, for example, his interpretation of verse 59:10 where he heaps vituperation upon *al-Rawāfiḍ*, leaving no doubt where his allegiance lies.⁸⁵

Al-Tha'labī then offers another interpretation of the identity of the relatives of verse 42:23. The relatives are the sons of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the grandfather of Muhammad. As we already have mentioned, the implication of such an interpretation is to include the Abbasids in the holy family. One would have expected the interpretation to stop here, for al-Tha'labī has more than exhausted the possibilities. Yet an interesting discussion ensues on verse 42:23 that touches also on the question of whether or not it is vitiated by other verses. The verse has, according to some people, been abrogated by verses: 38:86, 12:104, 23:72, 52:40. The latter verses protest the notion that Muhammad was asking for a reward or compensation for his religious and prophetic mission.⁸⁶ The argument advanced by the abrogation camp was that verse 42:23 was Meccan and Muhammad's inability to protect himself was at the basis of the Qur'ān's calling for a respect for blood ties. After his immigration to Medina, Muhammad did not need his recalcitrant relatives to protect him, and that is why God revealed the other verses where it is stated clearly that Muhammad did not need any repayment for his prophetic mission. That there is a contradiction between the verse 42:23 on

⁸⁵ *Al-Kashf*, M 106, fols. 96(a)–97(b), esp. 97(a) where he calls them followers of erring doctrines, (*al-ahwā' al-muḍillah*). Such phrases are too numerous to be missed indeed.

⁸⁶ There are more of these disclaimer verses that al-Tha'labī could have mentioned. That Muhammad did not want a reward was a constant refrain in the Qur'ān.

the one hand, and all the other verses, on the other hand, is hard to miss. Thus one solution was to see in this instance a case of inner-quranic abrogation, whereby the apparent contradiction would be resolved. Having given ample space for the proponents of the abrogation of verse 42:23, al-Tha'labī comes out strongly against this view, seeing in it an analysis both unwelcome (*qawl ghayra marḍī*) and weak (*wa-lā qawī*). First, he says it is not possible that all these commentators who did not subscribe to the abrogation of the verse are wrong. But more importantly, according to al-Tha'labī, it is morally repugnant (*kafā qubḥan*) that the notion of pleasing God through the showing and harboring of love to the family of Muhammad could be abrogated. Objecting with such vehemence to an opinion voiced by other commentators is rather rare in *al-Kashf*. Beneath this strong rejection lies the fear of dismantling one of the best answers that Sunnism had found to combat the lure of Shī'ī ideology. The answer consisted in legitimizing the love and adoration of Muhammad's descendants and allowing for this love a place in the pietistic structure of a devout Sunni; it did so without imbuing that love with political implications, thus depriving the Shī'ī of a very effective weapon in their propaganda wars with the Sunnīs. Al-Tha'labī finishes by furnishing a tradition that supports his rejection of the abrogation proposition. The tradition, which is rather long, is in the format, "whoever dies loving the family of Muhammad dies a martyr, or whoever dies loving the family of Muhammad dies a forgiven person, a believer, of perfect faith, etc."⁸⁷ Al-Tha'labī is thus using hadith to prove that this verse could not have been abrogated.

The variety of methods used to introduce political interpretations is remarkably varied in al-Tha'labī's commentary. There is the simple equation phrase: *yā'nī*, x means y. Thus "He let forth the two seas that meet together, between them a barrier they do not overpass" (55:19–20) means according to one interpretation the following: "Fāṭima and 'Alī." While verse 55:22 "From them comes forth the pearl and the coral" means "al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn."⁸⁸ In other instances the discussion of a certain verse leads to a political interlude without that interlude appearing to be related or relevant at first glance to the interpretation of the verse in question. In dis-

⁸⁷ *man māta 'alā hubbi 'Alī Muḥammad māta shahīdan, maghfūran lahu, mustakmil al-īmān, etc.* M105, fol. 68(a).

⁸⁸ *Al-Kashf*, M106, fols. 36(b)–37(a).

cussing the short chapter of 110 which reads: "when comes the help of God, and victory, and thou seest men entering God's religion in throngs, then proclaim the praise of thy Lord, and seek His forgiveness; for He turns again unto men," al-Tha'labī turns to the fate of the early Muslim community after Muhammad's death, a turn that is puzzling at first.⁸⁹ While al-Ṭabarī does not venture beyond stating that the revelation of the chapter was taken by Muhammad and his companions as a sign of his imminent demise, al-Tha'labī connects the fate of Muhammad and the fate of his community after him and recounts the discussions of the companions as to who should lead the nation. But what first appears as an unrelated digression and non-exegetical is, on closer analysis, as legitimate and organic an interpretation as any. Insofar as Muhammad's death was mainly a religious and political event, any quranic hint that alludes to his death is also a quranic reference to Muhammad's succession. The reason for a political discourse on a verse about Muhammad's death is thus exegetical. This is one of the many features that set al-Tha'labī's commentary apart from the tradition, insofar as it takes the contextualization of the quranic word to the fullest. Thus the moral and political worlds that stand behind the Qur'ān are not unnecessary elements for a better understanding of its word, but rather intrinsic to such understanding. The admonitory and political interpretations that appear to be contrived at first are not only important for understanding the Qur'ān but indispensable. They are necessitated by internal tension in the text itself.

Having finished with giving the same interpretation of this sura as al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha'labī cites a tradition that states that this chapter was revealed after the battle of Ḥunayn and that Muhammad called on 'Alī and Fāṭima and informed them of its revelation and that they (meaning 'Alī) would be fighting against believers, a clear hint at the future civil war. 'Alī asks what would be the justification for fighting fellow believers; to this Muhammad says there would be justification if they produce any heretical innovation in religion, or used *ra'y* (legal opinion) as their guide. 'Alī then asks about cases where there is no clear rule from scripture, to which Muhammad answers that consultation (*shūrā*) among the believers is the answer to solving new problems. Finally, Muhammad says that had he wanted to appoint a successor to him, a caliph, it would have been 'Alī, because

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, M107, fols. 171(b)–182(b).

(and the list reads like an election manifesto) 'Alī was among the first to convert to Islam, he is a relative of Muhammad, he is son-in-law of Muhammad, and husband of the best woman in the world, and finally because 'Alī's father was a great supporter of Muhammad and thus Muhammad owes it to him to treat his descendants well.

On its own this tradition is politically flagrant in its pro-Shī'ī articulation as is no other. But as the love of Muhammad's family was usurped by the Sunnīs, so was the validity of the argument that 'Alī was a most suitable candidate to the caliphate. That eligibility was, however, qualified by the historical reality that Muhammad did not appoint him as a successor and as such he was not being robbed of any rightful legacy. Having adduced this ḥadīth as part of his interpretation of chapter 110, al-Tha'labī finishes with an equally pro-Sunnī ḥadīth where Muhammad announces to the aspiring, and conspiring, al-'Abbās (who was seeking an appointment for 'Alī) that Abu Bakr is the caliph. All should obey him and through him is the salvation of the *Ummah*.⁹⁰ We can see that the conflicting claims of the different camps are fully stated and if they sound contradictory, that should not surprise us. The Sunnī compromise was, after all, an impossible attempt to reconcile irreconcilable positions. Al-Tha'labī was merely a devout recounter of its achievement.

Finally, I would like to give an example of a political interpretation that was introduced through the method of fictive narrative. In his treatment of verses 76:8–10, which reads, "they give food, for the love of Him, to the needy, the orphan, the captive [then quoting the Qur'ān], 'We feed you only for the face of God; we desire no recompense from you, no thankfulness,'" al-Tha'labī brings an interpretation in the form of a story about the meaning of these verses that combines both the political and the religious merits of Fāṭima and 'Alī.⁹¹ The story, one of the most elaborate political stories in al-Tha'labī's commentary, has in addition to the narrative structure many poetic pieces which point to an elaborate history behind this interpretation. The story runs as follows: one day 'Alī and Fāṭima cooked a meager meal for the two of them and their two sons and the maidservant. A needy (*miskīn*) individual came and asked for food as they were about to eat. Although they were hungry and had been fasting for the whole day they eventually gave

⁹⁰ Ibid., M107, fol. 18b.

⁹¹ Ibid., M 107, fols. 15b–19a.

their meal to the hungry visitor. The same happened for each of the next two days, the visitor on the second day being an orphan (*yafīm*) and then on the third a prisoner (*asīr*). By the third day they were on the brink of death because of their continuous fasting and the absence of food. Muhammad eventually realized what had happened and brought food for the family, but not before praising their fortitude and charity. It is after this incident that the verses in question were revealed. Al-Qurṭubī stood in bafflement at this story. He still copied the whole of it into his commentary, but went out of his way to show its ridiculousness and inauthenticity.⁹² That of course is beside the point. In al-Tha'labī's commentary it was part of the tradition and as such was fit to be included.

E. Exegesis and Prophetic Ḥadīth

At the heart of the hermeneutical enterprise of al-Tha'labī lies his weaving together two of the most fundamental aspects of the Islamic medieval achievement: the prophetic ḥadīth and the enterprise of quranic exegesis. The fusion was in a sense the culmination of the process of integration of the different aspects of the Islamic culture of high medieval times. The prophetic ḥadīth, an edifice that was nearing its completion both through the production of massive compilations and the elaboration of the science of ḥadīth (*ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*), stood apart, as it were, from quranic interpretation as it reached its first grand articulation in the commentary of al-Ṭabarī. Al-Tha'labī brought the two together and thus initiated what was thereafter to be a continuous relationship between the two streams of Islamic medieval production.

This assertion might come as a surprise to many; after all did not al-Ṭabarī's commentary achieve that already? It did not, and I shall demonstrate why. It is important to make clear the distinction between three different kinds of "traditions" in classical Qur'ān commentaries. The first, the most common and the bulk of what constitutes al-Ṭabarī's commentary, consists of traditions that are interpretations of the Qur'ān that go back to famous authorities like Ibn 'Abbās,

⁹² *Al-Jāmi'*, v. 19: 131–135. Al-Qurṭubī is not without humor in his dismissal of the story. He believes that it was fabricated in a prison, where boredom is the best incentive for fabrications.

‘Ikrimah and Muqātil. These are traditions insofar as they have an *isnād* (a chain of transmission) and a *matn* (a text). But they are not ḥadīth proper insofar as they are not prophetic logia.⁹³ Indeed, the new editors of al-Ṭabarī’s *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, the brothers Shākir, called these non-prophetic-interpretive traditions *athar* (pl. *āthār*) in their footnotes instead of ḥadīth, fully aware of the difference between the two.⁹⁴ Furthermore, these interpretative traditions differ markedly from prophetic ḥadīth insofar as they are not independent entities, a point one cannot emphasize enough. This kind of interpretive tradition depends on the lemma to make itself comprehensible. It presupposes the quranic logia, and is a direct commentary on these words. The prophetic ḥadīth, however, is a fully independent enclosed entity. It might allude to a quranic verse, or hint at a quranic injunction, but it is never structurally dependent on the presence of the quranic lemma. Ḥadīth, or prophetic traditions, consist of an *isnād* and a *matn* or text where the *matn* is specifically a quotation from Muhammad himself—a tradition that reports about an action of Muhammad thus qualifies as ḥadīth. Rarely do we come across a prophetic tradition that is cited as an interpretation of a verse in al-Ṭabarī.⁹⁵

The second kind of traditions that are present in commentaries prior to al-Thaʿlabī were indeed prophetic traditions insofar as they were directly related to Muhammad, whether through quoting of his words or reporting about his deeds. These ḥadīths mainly gave the circumstance surrounding a certain verse. The most famous of these are of course some of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (reasons of revelation) traditions which report about why a verse was revealed. But these traditions never constituted a significant part of the interpretative material. Another small section of these ḥadīths were interpretations proper, in the form “Muhammad said this verse means this.”⁹⁶ Before al-Thaʿlabī these traditions were rather scarce. They are however only a minuscule part of the prophetic tradition. In the compilations of ḥadīth, the sections on prophetic quranic interpretation are rather short.

⁹³ The Shākir brothers, editors of al-Ṭabarī’s commentary, specifically call them *athār* fully conscious of the difference between the two.

⁹⁴ See volume one of their edition, under the heading “Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī,” 1961.

⁹⁵ See below where I differentiate between primary and secondary interpretative ḥadīth.

⁹⁶ The interpretive traditions that have Muhammad as the interpreter would increase in number as the centuries went by. Ultimately, they were seen by some exegetes, the radical hermeneutical camp, as the best of interpretations.

The third kind of traditions in Qurʾān commentaries are the prophetic ḥadīth proper. I am referring here to the ḥadīths that were primarily part of ḥadīth compilations and were not initially conceived as interpretive. Thus these traditions are not exegetical and most importantly the exegetical tradition was mostly free of their presence before al-Thaʿlabī.⁹⁷ They were primarily introduced to the exegetical tradition by al-Thaʿlabī and are thus a post-Thaʿlabī phenomenon.⁹⁸ In that respect al-Thaʿlabī radically reoriented the *tafsīr* genre. The prophetic tradition was made an integral part of quranic interpretation and thus the two revelations, the written and the prophetic or oral, were as it were reunited, thus recreating in the hermeneutical event a structure resembling the character of Muhammad, who was the only individual in whom both were once united. The Qurʾān, read through the prophetic Sunnah, becomes the incarnation of that which will guide the Muslim nation: the Qurʾān (present as lemmas) and the Sunnah (present as exegesis) made into one. The formulation of *tafsīr* as the embodiment of both divine revelation and prophetic revelation necessarily made it a replacement of Muhammad, his true *Caliph* or successor who was to lead the community. The failure of the Caliphate on the religious level opened the road to a structuring of religious knowledge as his successor. In *tafsīr* the Sunnī community has, in effect, its immanent prophet through textual fiat.

The interpretation of verse 53:32, where God orders believers not to hold themselves “purified” (*fa-lā tuzakkū anfusakum*), is one of several examples in al-Thaʿlabī’s commentary that will help explain what I mean by his tying the two revelations together through exegesis.⁹⁹ The phrase is taken by both al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿlabī to mean that believers should not present themselves as pure or guilt-

⁹⁷ It is clear of course that I disagree with John Burton who believes that the ḥadīth literature is primarily exegetical in nature. See his arguments in his *Introduction to the Ḥadīth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994).

⁹⁸ Like many of the features discussed in this chapter, this phenomenon was also evident in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary, albeit in small numbers. One of the few examples that I could find was al-Ṭabarī’s interpretation of verse 13: 20 (“who fulfil God’s covenant, and break not the compact”) where, after finishing the interpretation, he cites a prophetic ḥadīth that is not a direct interpretation but a statement on the same theme of keeping one’s pledges. The adducing of the prophetic ḥadīth here is unexpected insofar as it is not a direct interpretation but an adjacent one. See his *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, v. 13: 139.

⁹⁹ Needless to say, most of the admonitory interpretations are based on incorporating the ḥadīth into quranic exegesis.

less.¹⁰⁰ While al-Ṭabarī has nothing more to add, al-Tha'labī interprets the phrase to mean also that one should not praise oneself. Having finished interpreting the verse, al-Tha'labī then quotes a prophetic tradition that states: "Muhammad said, If you see flatterers, then throw dust in their faces."¹⁰¹ The main questions an investigator has to ask is to what extent this prophetic ḥadīth is an interpretation for the phrase, and whether al-Tha'labī is justified in bringing into his interpretation of this verse the prophetic tradition that is not directly related to it.

The underlying justification for bringing prophetic traditions which are not strictly interpretive into quranic exegesis lies in the belief in the complementary role of the Sunnah (or prophetic tradition) in relation to the Qur'ān. The prophetic Sunnah, according to Sunnī articulation, completed and perfected the divine revelation. Thus when the prophetic Sunnah spoke about the notion of praise and self-assessment, al-Tha'labī saw fit to bring that into his interpretation of a quranic verse on the same topic in order to illuminate the word of God and His intentions. What the quranic phrase does not address is the praise lavished on an individual from others and whether that is permissible or not. Self-praise is forbidden, but what about receiving praise from others? The prophetic tradition makes it clear that any praise is dangerous regardless of the source. Thus the two revelations, when speaking on the same topic, are brought together. If we accept the premise of the common origin of the two revelations and the complementary role of the Sunnah, then the act of bringing them together is hermeneutically justified. The divine word revealed in the Qur'ān could not remain axenic in light of this hermeneutical approach.

The integration of the prophetic Sunnah into the Qur'ān commentary of al-Tha'labī was achieved at different levels and through different strategies. As we have already seen, al-Tha'labī starts each chapter by a prophetic preamble in which the worth and merit of that chapter is assessed. The prophetic word and the divine word are thus linked, the one acting as the gateway for the other. The guide to the divine word is the prophetic word. Another way the

¹⁰⁰ For al-Ṭabarī's interpretation see his *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 27: 69–70. For al-Tha'labī see *al-kashf*, M106, fol. 13(b).

¹⁰¹ Al-Ṭabarī of course does not quote the tradition. For the tradition see A.J. Wensinck's *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane*, v. 2: 267.

prophetic ḥadīth was introduced was in the admonitory exegetical sections. The main tool of admonitory exegesis was the connecting of the moral world of the Sunnah and the moral imperatives of the Divine word. Salvific interpretations were heavily dependent on prophetic ḥadīth also. Indeed, there is not one aspect of the commentary of al-Tha'labī that is not affected by the presence of the prophetic word. The seam that joined the prophetic and the divine is not noticeable.

In interpreting the phrase of verse 76:12, "and [God] recompensed them [believers] for their patience (*ṣabarū*)," al-Ṭabarī paraphrases the statement as follows: "recompensed them for their patience in worshipping God and their patience in avoiding the deeds He prohibited."¹⁰² No more is added. Al-Tha'labī, on the other hand, not only furnishes more interpretations than al-Ṭabarī does, by quoting authorities neglected by al-Ṭabarī and by quoting the mystics, but he finishes by adducing a prophetic tradition on the meaning of *al-ṣabr* (patience).¹⁰³ Muhammad was asked about patience and replied, "There are four kinds of patience. The first is the patience one exhibits on first hearing bad news (public forbearance, fortitude). The second is the patience one exhibits towards the execution of one's religious duties. The third is the patience in front of temptations. The fourth is the patience in the face of calamities." Notice that in al-Ṭabarī's interpretation the verb "to be patient" is understood to be functioning in the religious realm. What patience is is not a question this verse seems to ask or evoke according to al-Ṭabarī. For al-Tha'labī however, the verse is about patience in general and what patience means. Muhammad has talked about patience and being patient and what is more suitable than to elucidate this verb through his words? Patience appears from al-Tha'labī's interpretation as a virtue both dependent on, and independent of the religious realm. Patience is fortitude first and foremost according to Muhammad. Al-Tha'labī seems to say that the reward for patience is not only for religious patience but for the very virtue of being patient.

In the two examples of verse 53:32 and 76:12 that I have just discussed, prophetic ḥadīth as introduced by al-Tha'labī functions not as a primary interpretation (x means y) but as secondary interpretation, or what I would like to call "adjacent interpretation." In

¹⁰² *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 29: 213

¹⁰³ For al-Tha'labī see *al-kashf*, M107, fol. 14(b).

this kind of exegesis the prophetic tradition is brought in to complete the presentation of a concept (patience, how to treat an orphan, relations with relatives), thus offering a fuller picture of the moral and spiritual world of Islam as perfected in the prophetic tradition.¹⁰⁴ What allows al-Tha'labī to introduce a prophetic hadith is the presence in the verse of a key word or a theme that evokes association. A verse mentioning patience allows him to incorporate a tradition on patience, and a verse about self-praise becomes an occasion to quote a tradition on the danger of being pleased with praise. In such adjacent interpretations the ḥadīth is never a direct interpretation of a word or a phrase, but an elaboration on the theme or the word. This is a remarkable departure from the main methods of doing quranic exegesis prior to al-Tha'labī. Though we can find a few scattered examples of this approach in al-Ṭabarī, it is only with al-Tha'labī that we see it consistently used, resulting in a transformation of the genre.

I would like to give a final example of al-Tha'labī's use of secondary or adjacent interpretive traditions in his commentary. Verse 13:21 orders believers to "join (*yasīlūn*) what God has commanded shall be joined." Al-Ṭabarī takes this to mean that God has commanded believers to preserve the connection between themselves and their relatives, or what is known in Arabic as *waṣl al-arḥām*, the joining of the wombs, that is, being good to one's kinsfolk.¹⁰⁵ The presence of the verb *w-s-l*, to connect, in the verse must have predetermined al-Ṭabarī's understanding of this verse, since the verb is part of the idiom "joining the wombs." The verb *w-s-l* and its antonym *q-t-ʿ* (to cut, sever) has been almost exclusively associated with the word *raḥim*.¹⁰⁶

The context, however, shows that the verse 13:21 has more to do with the disjointed understanding of the monotheistic sacred history that is characteristic of Muhammad's opponents than with benevolence for one's kinsfolk. What the Qur'ān is saying is that believers cannot believe in one prophet and disbelieve in another. Monotheistic history is one and indivisible. One can not believe in some part and discard another, to quote verse 2:85. It is a testimony of al-Tha'labī's sagacity that he took into consideration the context of the verse and

¹⁰⁴ The proper treatment of an orphan has been discussed in the section on admonitory exegesis.

¹⁰⁵ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 13: 140.

¹⁰⁶ Of course there is no way to know if the two verbs have been connected before the Qur'ān.

was not sidetracked by the easy association between the verb *waṣala* (hence *qata'*) and the idiom to *yaṣil al-raḥim* (to join the womb). He is thus the only medieval commentator who has read the verse contextually first and then associatively. The verse means, according to al-Tha'labī, that God wanted believers to "believe in all the holy Books and prophets without any favoritism," an interpretation that echoes verse 2:85.¹⁰⁷ Al-Tha'labī however, in deference to the tradition of quranic exegesis, offers the usual (al-Ṭabarī's) interpretation for the verse. The second interpretation, which was advanced by the majority of exegetes as al-Tha'labī wearily notes, is that one should not neglect one's duty towards one's kinsfolk. The word for kinsfolk in Arabic used here is *al-raḥim*. Al-Tha'labī has finished interpreting the verse but he has not finished with the verse. The word *raḥim* used in the second interpretation induces him to relate three prophetic traditions that expound on the Muslim's duty towards kinsfolk.¹⁰⁸ All these traditions have the word *raḥim* in them.

The first tradition offers a folk etymology of the word womb (*raḥim*); it is a derivation from one of God's names in the Qur'ān, *al-Raḥmān*, the merciful. The tradition is in the form of a quotation by Muhammad of his God: "I am God, and I am the Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*), I created the womb (*al-raḥim*) and gave it a name derived (*fa-shṭaqaqtu lahā min ismī*) from my name, who ever joins it (meaning keep the ties with ones kinsfolk) I reach out to him, who ever cuts the ties I cut him." In this ḥadīth the central role of blood ties is established through God's own decree. Keeping the ties to relatives is equated to keeping the ties to God. In the second ḥadīth a man comes to Muhammad and asks about a deed that guarantees admittance to Heaven. Muhammad replies that if he believed in one God, prayed the prayers, and preserved the ties with his kinsfolk (literally: joins or connects the womb) then he will enter Heaven. Notice how the notion of being on good terms with one's relatives has become a central issue in the Islamic moral system next to monotheism and performing the ritual prayers. The final tradition has Muhammad stating that God is the swiftest in rewarding those who are good to

¹⁰⁷ *Al-Kāshf*, M103, fol. 131(b): *arād al-īmān bi-jamī' al-kutub wa-al-nusul wa-lā yufarriqūn baynahumā* (sic).

¹⁰⁸ For the record, he brings four traditions in total, three prophetic and one from the famous Ka'b al-Aḥbār quoting the Hebrew Bible. See *ibid.*, M103, fols. 131(b)-132(a).

their relatives and in punishing those who fornicate. Again, we can see the prophetic moral world has come to place a heavy emphasis on keeping the ties with one's relatives. The moment the Qur'ān—and here indeed an interpretation of the Qur'ān—presented al-Tha'labī with a chance to connect the two moral worlds, he did so. Not one ḥadīth but three ḥadīths were adduced to elucidate the importance of a quranic injunction (or a supposed quranic injunction).

These examples from al-Tha'labī's commentary could be multiplied indefinitely. But it is clear that the effect of this approach to quranic exegesis resulted in a reworking of the two main trends of Islamic culture into a unity. On every turn the prophetic ḥadīth is tied to the quranic word. The commentary of al-Tha'labī is nothing short of a grand culmination of the high Islamic culture with its blend of poetry, philology, belle-lettres, storytelling, prophetic Sunnah, history, and wisdom literature, ushering in a new age in quranic exegesis.

F. Organization and Scholasticism in Quranic Exegesis

There is, of course, already a consensus among modern scholars that al-Ṭabarī's work represented a new phase in quranic exegesis. His *Jāmi' al-bayān* is said not only to have ushered in what is called the classical age of this genre, but to have brought it to perfection. His work is deservedly praised. Yet this assessment comes with the unavoidable implication that quranic exegesis after him went downhill. With the exception of two later exegetes, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī, one is hard-pressed to find any noteworthy exegete from among the hundreds that came after al-Ṭabarī. Or so the scholarly consensus would have us believe. Apart from the classical-age myth that lies at the heart of this view, a careful examination of the tradition itself does not bear out this picture. Al-Ṭabarī was in fact the originator of a trend and not its culmination or perfection. Comparison of al-Ṭabarī's monumental work with al-Bayḍāwī's four-volume work could indeed leave the impression that a decline has happened in the tradition of quranic exegesis. The comparison is not only unfair, but misguided if the purpose is solely to establish a picture of decline. The work of al-Bayḍāwī, though a quranic commentary, belongs to a different category from that of al-Ṭabarī's, each of them deriving from a different kind of exegetical tradition. The Islamic exegetical tradition has spun two very different categories of quranic commentaries. The

first are encyclopedic commentaries, like al-Ṭabarī's, al-Qurṭubī's, and al-Rāzī's. These commentaries are, in addition to the monumental size that betrays their affiliation, veritable depositories of the cumulative interaction between successive Muslim generations and the word of God. They are the *diwān* of the Qur'ān, or its register, to use Islamic terminology. Al-Ṭabarī's work belongs to this category while al-Bayḍāwī's does not. And even within the encyclopedic category the tradition has evolved and matured beyond al-Ṭabarī's conception. Indeed my work has sought to prove that at every important juncture the classical tradition owes more to al-Tha'labī's reformulation than to al-Ṭabarī's. The evidence of al-Tha'labī's influence that I have presented is enough to show that al-Ṭabarī's work was not so widely read as we might have thought; it certainly does not seem to have exerted the preponderant influence that al-Tha'labī's work did.

The second category is the *madrasa* or college commentaries; the works of al-Samarqandī, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Bayḍāwī, are examples of this category.¹⁰⁹ These commentaries lacked the anthological depth and breadth of the first, substantially limiting the number of possible meanings to a given verse or word. They were usually short enough to be copied into two large volumes. They were extremely popular since they were not costly to copy or preserve; the *madrasa* commentaries filled a gap that was impossible to bridge by the multivolume sprawling encyclopedic commentaries. The existence of these two kinds of exegetical compositions I have argued, should be kept in mind when investigating Qur'ān commentaries because it allows us a better understanding of the development and the nature of this tradition. It is rather impossible to make sense of the tradition without this dichotomy in mind. Emphasizing the difference between the two categories, however, should not imply that they were not interdependent. The exegetical tradition is first and foremost a genealogical tradition where one work has sprouted another. One adapted, refuted, abridged and modified old material. One also added new interpretations. The growth of this tradition was thus always organic.

The bipartite division of the tradition presented here is not a novel idea; it has been envisioned by the Islamic tradition itself. Al-Tha'labī

¹⁰⁹ The use of the word *madrasa*, one might argue, is anachronistic since some of the works were written before the flourish of the *madrasa* educational system. My choice is motivated by the fact that this kind of composition knew its best examples after the establishment of the schools.

was the first to formulate such a dichotomy. In the introduction to his work, if we recall, he chastises a group of commentators who, despite writing excellent commentaries have failed to make their works accessible to the reader. The commentaries were tediously long and repetitive. Among those whom he mentions is al-Ṭabarī.¹¹⁰ This is the first category of Qur'ān commentaries. As we see, al-Tha'labī was taking issue not with their content, which he praised, but with the method of presentation. A second group of exegetes that he attacks were those who have "shorn exegesis" of its constituent elements like elucidation of legal and prohibited acts (*ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*) and the tackling of ambiguities (*ghawāmiḍ*) and problematic verses (*mushkilāt*). By these he meant the second category of commentaries.

Al-Tha'labī was unwilling to solve the problem of the unwieldy size of the first category by churning out another commentary like the ones in the second category. His remedy to the problem of the encyclopedic commentaries was one of organization.¹¹¹ The size was not going to be affected. He was determined to write an organized work (*muhadḍhab*), a systematized work (*manẓūm*). It would be carefully outlined (*nassaqtuhu*) and fashioned (*laṣṣaqtuhu*).¹¹² Faced with an ever-increasing mass of material, al-Tha'labī sat out to organize and order it. What he ended up doing was not different from what was happening in all other comparable scholarly fields around him: *tab-wīb* and *tafrī' al-masā'il*, the organizing of written compositions into chapters and sections. For the first time in the history of quranic exegesis we have subheadings in the body of the work that were different from the divisions of the quranic chapters themselves.

Although al-Ṭabarī discusses in the introduction to his commentary many hermeneutical issues presented in chapter-like divisions, he strictly adheres to the old discursive method of organization. The different divisions in the introduction are not called chapters but are rather supplied with descriptive headings that act as a separation between different topics. Thus each new section starts with the phrase "statement on," in Arabic, *al-qawl fī*.¹¹³ Nowhere do we find the word *bāb* or chapter. Indeed each verse or group of verses in the body of

¹¹⁰ See Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 17–18.

¹¹¹ I have already discussed al-Tha'labī's solution to the problem of *isnād* in Qur'ān commentaries in Chapter Three.

¹¹² Goldfeld, *Quranic Commentary*, 19.

¹¹³ See *Jamī' al-bayān*, v. 1: 11, "*al-qawl fī al-lughah allatī nazala bi-hā al-Qur'ān min lughāt al-'Arab*."

the commentary is introduced with the same phrase (*al-qawl fī ta'wīl qawlihi ta'ālā*). As far as al-Ṭabarī was concerned the discussions at the beginning of his introduction are not materially (or conceptually) different from interpretation proper. The matter is different with al-Tha'labī, who titles similar discussions in his introduction as chapters or *bāb*.¹¹⁴ This is not an insignificant difference, a mere addition as it were of formal title headings. It betrays a different attitude towards the craft of quranic interpretation. Al-Ṭabarī did not interrupt the flow of the commentary proper to discuss any non-lemma related matter. The commentary is not a place for extra-quranic discussions or digressions. By that I mean that a verse that mentions faith or *īmān* is not the occasion for a formal discussion or an excursus on faith as the Islamic tradition has defined it theologically.

Let me give an example. Detailed though it is, al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of the first verse that mentions the root faith (2:3) lacks the essential elements that characterize any theological discussion about faith in an Islamic context.¹¹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī neglects to explain the relationship between the concept of faith or *īmān* and *islām*. But even his definition of *īmān* is incomplete. He does not mention that faith by then included believing in the doctrine of predestination (*al-qadā' wa-al-qadar*). Having decided to define what faith is, al-Ṭabarī seems peculiarly unwilling to give a satisfactorily complete discourse on faith.

Glancing at al-Tha'labī's commentary on this verse we see a marked development occurring. Al-Tha'labī has taken his cue from al-Ṭabarī and does indeed think it appropriate to discuss faith in his interpretation. But the half-hearted attempt of al-Ṭabarī is fully transformed here. Al-Tha'labī simply starts with a chapter on faith: "*Faṣl fī al-īmān*," a full-fledged discussion on faith.¹¹⁶ What is most intriguing about the discussion about faith in this chapter is al-Tha'labī's insistence on discussing the relationship between faith (*īmān*) and Islam (*islām*) and between faith and fate. At the heart of this discussion about faith in this chapter lies the citation of seven prophetic traditions concerning belief. The most important of these is the catechistic ḥadīth of Jibrīl.¹¹⁷ In this famous ḥadīth, the angel Gabriel

¹¹⁴ *Al-Kaṣṣf*, M98, fol. 14(b), "*bāb fī faḍl al-Qur'ān wa-ahlihi wa-tilāwātihi*."

¹¹⁵ *Jāmī' al-bayān*, v. 1: 100–101.

¹¹⁶ *Al-Kaṣṣf*, M98, fols. 26(a)–28(b).

¹¹⁷ On this ḥadīth see Wensinck, *Concordance*, v. 2: 518.

comes in the guise of a traveler and sits in front of Muhammad and asks him four questions: What is *islām*, what is *īmān*, what is *ihsān*, and what are the signs of the end of the world. To these Muhammad supplies what to the Sunnīs has become the foundation of their faith. The chapter on faith is most importantly a small but complete self-enclosed unity that could be read on its own. Quranic interpretation is no more the same after this excursus. The classical age of encyclopedic compendiums has arrived. An exegete can now discourse on any topic as long as it relates to a quranic word or concept. Al-Tha'labī thus reformulated what is allowable and what is possible to incorporate into quranic commentaries. Al-Rāzī's scholastic commentary has its origins here.

Al-Tha'labī has chapters that deal primarily with theological issues such as his chapters on god-fearing (*al-taqwā*), sincerity of religion (*al-ikhlās*), on faith, its increase and decrease.¹¹⁸ Some of the chapters are supplied with lengthy subtitles that betray the research that went into their composition. In his discussion of verse 4:31, which speaks about major sins (*al-kabā'ir*), al-Tha'labī starts with this lengthy title: "A Chapter (*faṣl*) on the statements of the exegetes concerning the number of major sins which have been gathered from the Qur'ān and the Sunna supplied with arguments and proofs."¹¹⁹ Al-Tha'labī has chapters on non-theological matters such as the definition of a noun (*faṣl fī ḥadd al-ism*);¹²⁰ in others such as the chapter on the meaning of the word *khalīfah* (caliph), he does not shy away from discussing the qualifications of the Muslim leader.¹²¹ Some chapters are purely digressive like the chapters on the horses (*al-khayl*) and pen (*al-qalam*).¹²²

A large number of the chapters are concerned with legal matters, which is not surprising in light of the many verses in the Qur'ān that deal with these issues. Thus we have chapters on fasting, on performing the pilgrimage and the lesser pilgrimage together, on debt, on the virtues of being patient with those who can't pay their debts,

¹¹⁸ On god-fearing, see *al-kāshf*, M98, fol. 24(b); on *ikhlās*, see *ibid.*, M98, fol. 130(a); on faith its increase and decrease, see *ibid.*, M100, fol. 154(b).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, M101, fol. 46(a): *faṣl fī aqāwīl ahl al-ta'wīl fī 'adad al-kabā'ir, majmū'atan min al-kutāb wa-al-sunnah, maqrūnatan bi-al-dalīl wa-al-hujjah*.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, M98, fol. 5(a), the copiers of the manuscript disagree with al-Tha'labī's definition and they supply a critique in the margins; see fol. 5(b).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, M98, fol. 48(a).

¹²² On horses, see *ibid.*, M100, fol. 16(b); on pen, see *ibid.*, M106, fol. 161(b).

on dowry, and on divorce.¹²³ These are few examples from among many others scattered throughout the work. They give a picture of the new organizational element introduced into quranic interpretation.

It is important to emphasize here that the reordering of the material is not a mere organizational matter. It signals the entry of scholastic mentality into the discipline.¹²⁴ For in addition to the chapters which discuss various topics we have another innovation introduced by al-Tha'labī. This innovation is the "*mas'alah*" (a problem) headings that we encounter in the commentary. These are objections to a Sunnī position raised by some non-Sunnī sects using certain verses of the Qur'ān in support of their own views.¹²⁵ To these objections al-Tha'labī supplies an answer, a *jawāb*, or a refutation. One of the best examples of this scholastic method is al-Tha'labī's discussion of whether the Heaven that Adam dwelt in originally is the eternal Heaven promised to believers.¹²⁶ Al-Tha'labī cuts the flow of his interpretation of verse 2:35 and starts a new section with the title: *Mas'alah*. There he quotes al-Qadarīyah's view on the Heaven that Adam dwelt in and that it is different from the one God promised the believers (eternal Heaven). To this al-Tha'labī answers with a section that starts with the word "*wa-al-jawāb*" or the refutation. This is a textbook example of the scholastic method that Makdisi characterizes in his already cited article.

Finally, al-Tha'labī introduced a new method of organizing the burgeoning material available on certain chapters. When tackling two of the most important suras in the Qur'ān, suras 1 (*al-Fātiḥah*) and 97 (*al-Qadr*), he divides the material into chapters (*bāb*), a method that was later copied to great success by subsequent exegetes. Being the most important sura of the Qur'ān, sura 1 was bound to generate a disproportionate amount of comment. Al-Tha'labī has a chapter on the different names of sura 1, and a chapter on its indispensability for the validity of ritual prayer.¹²⁷ A more ambitious reorganization

¹²³ On fasting, see *ibid.*, M99, fol. 15(b); on performing the pilgrimage, see *ibid.*, M99, fol. 42(a); on debt, see *ibid.*, M99, fol. 211(a); on the virtue of being patient with debtors, see *ibid.*, M99, fol. 200(a); on dowry, see *ibid.*, M101, fol. 29(b); on divorce, see *ibid.*, M106, fol. 138(b).

¹²⁴ The best introduction to the scholastic tradition in early Islamic culture is still George Makdisi's article, "The Scholastic Method in medieval Education: An Enquiry into its Origins in Law and Theology," *Speculum* 49 (1974): 640-661.

¹²⁵ On *mas'alah* or *as'ilah*, see *ibid.*, 653.

¹²⁶ *Al-kāshf*, M98, fol. 53(b).

¹²⁷ The whole commentary on sura 1 is an example of al-Tha'labī's new orga-

was carried out with regard to sura 97. Here al-Tha'labī states that discussing this sura will be achieved in five chapters (*wa-al-kalām fī laylat al-qadr 'alā khamsat abwāb*).¹²⁸ That al-Tha'labī was aware of the novelty of his elaboration of the traditional hermeneutical approach to the Qur'ān is clear from his sometimes apparent unease before or after introducing such material into the body of his commentary. Let me give an example. After a lengthy chapter on inheritance and its obtuse jargon al-Tha'labī resumes interpretation proper by these words: now we return to interpretation, *raja'nā ilā al-tafsīr*.¹²⁹

The opening of the tradition of quranic commentary to the different currents of the Arabo-Islamic culture is one of the main contributions of al-Tha'labī. His reformulating the tradition radically transformed the craft of quranic exegesis, allowing the field to rise to the different challenges mounted from different directions. Al-Tha'labī's work is the missing link that explains the appearance of works like al-Zamakhsharī's and most importantly the scholastic work of al-Rāzī's. It is the trunk from which other medieval commentaries branched out. In the next chapter, I undertake to substantiate this claim through a broad survey of the trajectory of Qur'ān commentary in the centuries following al-Tha'labī.

nizational approach. Since the Maḥmūdīyah copy does not contain the folios for this sura see Istanbul University manuscript AY1731, fols. 10(a)–24(a).

¹²⁸ *Al-Kashf*, M107, fol. 123(a).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, M101, fol. 21(a).

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RECEPTION OF AL-THA'LABĪ'S COMMENTARY

1. *The Reception of al-Kashf in the Sunnī exegetical tradition*

In perusing a manuscript volume of *al-Kashf* in preparation for this study, I came across a short note on the title page by a bygone reader informing others that this *al-Kashf* was the work which lies at heart of the famed commentary of al-Ṭibī.¹ I was of course both intrigued and dismayed by this nugget of information. After years of studying *al-Kashf* and its legacy I thought I had gone beyond big surprises like these. Who was al-Ṭibī? I had never heard of him before. Is there really yet another work that is squarely based on *al-Kashf*? After some research I found al-Ṭibī. His full name was Sharaf al-Dīn, al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh. He died in 743/1343. A prolific author and an authority on *tafsīr* and hadith, he was active in the region of Iraq. Though many of his works are still available, none is edited or published.² But his Qur'ān commentary, which in Islamic secondary literature is referred to as a commentary on al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf*, is in reality a work based on both *al-Kashshāf* and *al-Kashf*.³ The work, judging from the huge number of copies available in the Muslim world, was extremely popular and influential in the *madrasa* curriculum.⁴

If anything, this anecdote is a cautionary tale of how little we know about the complex history of quranic commentary. The following chapter is but a preliminary sketch of this history as it relates

¹ To this informed reader I shall always be indebted. See the title page of manuscript AY1731, Istanbul University Library: "This is the unique commentary (*al-tafsīr al-fānd*) that was used extensively by al-Ṭibī (*naqal 'anhu al-imām akthar ḥaṣhiyatihi*) in his commentary on *al-Kashshāf*."

² On al-Ṭibī see al-Zirkī, *al-'Alām*, v. 3: 256; *GAL*, *SH*, 67.

³ The title of the work is: *Futūḥ al-ghayb fī al-kashf 'an qinā' al-rayb*. The title is hard to translate properly; *Revealing the Mask of Uncertainty* is a close approximation.

⁴ There are at least 160 volumes of this work alone in the libraries. Most of them are in Istanbul and North Africa. But copies are available in Egypt, Damascus, India, and Iran.

to *al-Kashf*. The claims that I make here, necessarily, will be subject to revision if and when we come across new material and especially as more and more monographs on individual authors are published. I stress that this is but a provisional outline. Since we know of commentaries that exist but have never been inspected, and commentaries that used to exist but whose contents will never be known, surely we have to presume that there are commentaries now unknown that may neither come to light, or whose existence will never be known! Thus we should not be surprised to know that Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr al-Jazarī (d. 606/1210) seems to have written a now lost work that combined both *al-Kashf* and *al-Kashshāf*.⁵ An important scholar of ḥadīth whose works are very popular even to this day, Ibn al-Athīr was the initiator of a trend in quranic exegesis of reworking *al-Kashf* into newly authored commentaries.⁶

Despite the lack of a complete inventory of quranic commentaries, one can still show that *al-Kashf* played a fundamental role in the history of classical quranic exegesis. I have already shown that the pre-Ṭabarī exegetical material was gathered independently twice, once by al-Ṭabarī, and again by al-Thaʿlabī. Moreover, it is clear that soon after al-Thaʿlabī exegetes ceased to use the individual pre-Ṭabarī commentaries directly and instead relied on the encyclopedic commentaries to offer them access to that material. So far I have been unable to come across any evidence that shows that any commentator after al-Thaʿlabī did otherwise. Moreover, the very absence of manuscript copies of these early works points to the fact that somewhere along the road they ceased to be copied. In a field that stipulated a hierarchy of authority based on precedence (the nearer an exegete was to the Companions of Muhammad, the greater his authority was). It is rather inexplicable that this tradition would allow such material to become inaccessible.

⁵ The title is *al-Inṣāf fi al-jamʿ bayna al-Kashf wa-al-Kashshāf* (The Just in Combining *al-Kashf* and *al-Kashshāf*). On Ibn al-Athīr al-Jazarī see Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, v. 4: 141–143.

⁶ There are at least two other epitomes of *al-Kashf* that I know of. I would not be surprised if more should surface as our knowledge of the manuscripts in the Muslim world becomes more complete. See *al-Fihris al-shāmil li-al-turāth al-ʿarabī al-islāmī al-makḥḥūṭ*, *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān, makḥḥūṭāt al-tafsīr* (Jordan, Amman: al-Majmaʿ al-Malakī li-buḥūth al-ḥadīth al-islāmīyah, 1987) v. 1: 153. Al-Thaʿlabī's *al-Kashf* was also summarized by al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 520/1126). The work is actually still available. On al-Ṭurṭūshī, see *al-ʿAllām*, v. 7: 133–134.

We do know, however, that the early layer of quranic commentary was available to later exegetes; they used it extensively, and we have to assume that they used either al-Ṭabarī or al-Thaʿlabī or others, or combinations of these to have access to the earlier material. My contention here is that it was mainly through al-Thaʿlabī, and works directly dependent on al-Thaʿlabī, that later pre-Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728/1328) exegetes had access to the pre-Ṭabarī material.⁷ Indeed, al-Ṭabarī's fortunes declined such that it would take a Sunnī-Shīʿī polemical war, and a retrenchment in Sunnī circles due to the devastation of the Mongol invasions, to revive interest in al-Ṭabarī. Of course I am referring here to the famous Ibn Taymīyah. For various historical reasons which I will have occasion to discuss later, Ibn Taymīyah sought to rearrange the hierarchy of texts in the scholarly tradition of quranic commentary. It is only after this instance that we witness a renewed interest among Muslim exegetes in al-Ṭabarī. Ironically it is Ibn Taymīyah's attempt to redirect the course of scholarship in quranic exegesis that opened my eyes to the complexity of this history.

But even Ibn Taymīyah's call for a radical hermeneutics, despite its undeniable success, did not raise interest in al-Ṭabarī's work markedly. The tradition, on the whole, remained apathetic to this monumental work.⁸ We have to remember that during the 19th century it was presumed all but lost. And I have yet to find a convincing explanation of the fact that we possess not one complete manuscript copy of al-Ṭabarī's work, other than that it went out of fashion. Even fragmentary or individual volumes are hard to come by, thus excluding the possibility that the ravages of time are the culprits. Are we to believe that one of the most bookish of pre-modern cultures failed to copy a Qurʾān commentary that we now recognize as the most important work it produced on the Qurʾān?⁹

⁷ The mystery as to where al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī derived their early material that is not available in al-Ṭabarī is now solved; it was from al-Thaʿlabī.

⁸ Ibn Kathīr (d. 773/1371) and Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) were the ones to revive a real interest in al-Ṭabarī.

⁹ The editors of the new incomplete edition of *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* bemoan the absence of a complete copy of the work. The fragments that are available are apparently of no use. See the remarks in the introduction, pp. 13–14. The situation is not as dire as they believe it to be, however. We do have a few volumes of the work scattered in libraries around the world, but the situation is unusual. For a tentative list of the manuscripts of *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* see, *al-Fihris al-shāmil li-al-turāth al-ʿarabī al-islāmī al-makḥḥūṭ*, *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān, makḥḥūṭāt al-tafsīr*, v. 1: 60–77.

More intriguing than the inexplicable absence of a significant number of copies of al-Ṭabarī's work is its remarkable lack of influence on subsequent Qur'ān commentaries. Once more we have few epitomes of the work done after it was authored;¹⁰ it was not at the base of any other commentary that I know of, and it was never used extensively till al-Suyūṭī made use of it in the tenth/sixteenth century.¹¹ The editors of the new incomplete edition of *Jāmi' al-bayān* are clear about this point. With but one witness to rely upon for the edition, the editor had to depend on works that used al-Ṭabarī to ascertain readings and fill lacunas. And the only medieval author to do so extensively was apparently al-Suyūṭī.¹² That we now consider al-Ṭabarī's work to be the jewel of medieval Islamic scholarship, and the native tradition did so as well, is ironic, for it does not mean that the native tradition used it extensively.

A closer look at the works produced after al-Tha'labī reveals the extent of his influence. I will exclude here the work of his student al-Wāḥidī as being too peculiar a case to be illustrative. The student did depend heavily on the master, yet unless we possess a study of his *al-Basīṭ* we cannot say much.¹³ But let us take al-Baghawī's (d. 516/1122) work for example. *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl* of al-Baghawī was one of the most popular of *madrasa* (short commentaries) of medieval times.¹⁴ The number of copies of the work available in the libraries is staggering. But *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl* is nothing but a reworking of *al-Kāshf*. Ibn Taymīyah was the first to draw attention to that,¹⁵ but

¹⁰ See the epitome of al-Tujībī (d. 419/1028), *Mukhtaṣar min tafsīr al-imām al-Ṭabarī*, Muḥammad al-Zufayrī, ed. (Cairo, 1970). This is the only epitome ever to be produced, see *GIS*, v. 1: 328.

¹¹ Ibn Kathīr (d. 773/1371) was the first to use al-Ṭabarī. Al-Suyūṭī's comments on al-Ṭabarī's work are another indication that the work was neglected. He informs the reader that he intends to summarize and reorganize the work (*ikhtisārūh wa-tahdhībūh*) so that others could use it and benefit from it. The implication is that the work is both hard to come by and hard to use; see his *Tabaqāt al-mufasssīn*, 'Alī 'Umar, ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Wihbah, 1976), 96.

¹² See *Jāmi' al-bayān*, Shākir brothers, ed. v. 1: 114. Al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834) used the work, but he is too late an author to refute my point.

¹³ The notion that the middle commentary, *al-Wasīṭ*, is a summary of the large commentary, *al-Basīṭ*, cannot be accepted anymore. A preliminary investigation into the nature of *al-Basīṭ* has revealed that we are dealing with a radically new reformulation of exegesis. I am in the process of preparing a new study on al-Wāḥidī.

¹⁴ On al-Baghawī, see 'Afāf 'Abd al-Ghaffūr Ḥamīd, *al-Baghawī wa-manhajūh fī al-tafsīr* (Jordan: Dār al-Furqān, 1982).

¹⁵ See his *Muqaddimah fī usūl al-tafsīr*, 32: *wa-al-Baghawī tafsīruh mukhtaṣarūn min tafsīr al-Tha'labī lākinmahu ṣān tafsīrahū 'an al-ahādīth al-mawḍū'ah wa-al-arā' al-mubtada'ah*.

al-Baghawī himself states as much in his introduction.¹⁶ Thus one of the most beloved of short works on the Qur'ān in Medieval Islam, one that has the blessing of even the radical Sunnī camp, was a reworking and summary of al-Tha'labī's work.¹⁷

In the three centuries after the production of *al-Kāshf* we have at least four works—excluding the works of al-Wāḥidī—that depend on it for their content. The first is al-Baghawī's (d. 516/1122) *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*, the second is Ibn al-Athīr's (d. 606/1210) *al-Inṣāf*, the third is al-Ṭībī's *Futūḥ al-ghayb* (d. 743/1342). If we recognize that al-Khāzin's (d. 741/1340) work *Lubāb al-ta'wīl fī ma'ānī al-tanzīl* is a commentary on al-Baghawī's *Ma'ālim*, then we realize to what degree al-Tha'labī's work was fundamental in the classical tradition of Qur'ān commentary.¹⁸ This is a remarkable pedigree of influence for al-Tha'labī's work, and no other medieval Qur'ān commentary can claim such an influence apart from that of al-Zamakhsharī.

Al-Tha'labī and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144)

What about other Qur'ān commentaries that were not part of this direct lineage? In particular I am interested in al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf*. Once more, a closer look into *al-Kashshāf* reveals that al-Zamakhsharī wrote the work while engaging in a dialogue with al-Tha'labī's *al-Kāshf*. If *al-Kāshf* was the most renowned of traditional Sunnī commentaries, it does make sense that the leading Mu'tazilī exegete would use it both to emulate and refute. The relationship is one of dialectical conversation, of adding, adapting, refuting and excising material from al-Tha'labī. It is true that al-Zamakhsharī

¹⁶ See *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1993), v. 1: 1–6. The introduction seems to imply that al-Baghawī has recourse to the works of early commentators as did al-Tha'labī, but a closer look at the work leaves no doubt that he was relying directly on *al-Kāshf* as it stood then and not on its sources. Ibn Taymīyah was not fooled. *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl* was a reworking of *al-Kāshf*. The work needs to be studied in conjunction with *al-Kāshf* in order to find exactly what al-Baghawī was trying to achieve. Ibn Taymīyah's claim that al-Baghawī was cleaning up *al-Kāshf*, though true, is too vague an assessment to give us a clear picture of the situation.

¹⁷ A preliminary study points to the fact that al-Baghawī removed excessive philological arguments, Sūfī material, and non-linguistic poetic material. He seems to have augmented the prophetic traditions, though not consistently. He also removed the political material, and removed traditions that were considered of flagrantly weak *isnads*.

¹⁸ See the introduction in volume 1 of *Lubāb al-ta'wīl fī ma'ānī al-tanzīl*, 'Abd al-Salām Shāhīn, ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1995).

was attempting to produce a Qur'ān commentary that conformed fully with the principles of a philological approach to the Qur'ān. However, al-Zamakhsharī was unable to present a fully philological reading of the Qur'ān simply because of the weight of the tradition on his education.¹⁹ In that respect he owes more to al-Tha'labī than he was willing to acknowledge. In addition to that, the nature of al-Zamakhsharī's commitment to philology was itself complex. Philology was allowed a full say insofar as it stood on his side, but we know that he would always side with tradition when it suited him, thus undermining his own efforts repeatedly. We should not be surprised to know that when the time came to find a title of the work, al-Zamakhsharī could not come up with anything better than a take off of al-Tha'labī's title.²⁰ But what sort of evidence do I have that proves there is an intimate relationship between the two books?

Before we delve into a closer comparison between al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf* and al-Tha'labī's *al-Kashf*, we need to address the thorny issue of the relationship between al-Zamakhsharī's work and that of Ibn Mardawayh (d. 410/1019).²¹ How can one do that when the work of Ibn Mardawayh is lost? The problem can be summarized as follows: al-Zamakhsharī adduces at the end of each sura he interprets prophetic traditions that speak of the merit of reading such a sura. These kinds of traditions I have already explored in al-Tha'labī. Only three commentators before al-Zamakhsharī mention such traditions. The first is al-Tha'labī, the second is al-Wāhidī, the third, is of course, Ibn Mardawayh.²² Is it possible that al-Zamakhsharī was using Ibn Mardawayh's work and not al-Tha'labī's? On closer inspection, we can dismiss this hypothesis for lack of evidence. What evidence we have points instead to al-Tha'labī. For example, a few

¹⁹ Another is the necessity of doctrinal coherence, which prevented a complete adherence to philological logic.

²⁰ *Al-Kashshāf* is an intensification form from the root *k-sh-f*.

²¹ I have already mentioned the elusive Ibn Mardawayh; on him see *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, v. 8: 38. See page 3, note 6.

²² Luckily medieval Muslim professors have left us with *takhrīj* works on al-Zamakhsharī's commentary. A *takhrīj* work is a work dedicated to verifying and supplementing the *asānīd* (chain of transmissions) of the prophetic traditions found in a given work that has failed to supply them. Thus we are able to tell exactly who mentioned and first recorded any prophetic tradition mentioned by al-Zamakhsharī. The work I relied upon for this study is that of Jamāl al-Dīn 'Abd Allāh b. Yūsuf b. Muḥammad al-Zayla'ī (d. 762/1360), *Takhrīj al-aḥādīth wa-al-āthār al-wāq'ah fī tafsīr al-Kashshāf li-al-Zamakhsharī*, Sulṭān Ibn Fahd al-Ṭabībī, ed. (al-Riyāḍ: Dār Ibn Khuzaymah, 1414).

of these traditions are only common to *al-Kashshāf* and *al-Kashf*.²³ It is of course impossible to be absolutely certain, since al-Zayla'ī might have failed to mention that they also exist in Ibn Mardawayh's work.

This, needless to say, does not prove that al-Zamakhsharī used al-Tha'labī as his main source only. Could he have used al-Ṭabarī? The relationship between al-Zamakhsharī and al-Ṭabarī should also be investigated. Fortunately, here we are able to compare the three works. One of the main distinctions between al-Ṭabarī's and al-Tha'labī's methods was the latter's use of prophetic traditions as a means of interpretation (what I called tangential interpretation, or peripheral interpretation). Such a method is highly unpredictable, as it depends on the exegete's knowledge of the prophetic tradition and his personal preferences. Consequently, this method can be used as a fingerprint on textual evidence to detect possible affinities between the works we have at hand. If al-Tha'labī used a certain ḥadīth to explain a verse, and if this ḥadīth has not been used by al-Ṭabarī before, and if this tradition is such that it could not possibly have been used before in this capacity by others, then any later commentator who has used this tradition must have depended on al-Tha'labī. Since we do not have all the commentaries that stem from before al-Tha'labī we have to rely on *takhrīj* medieval works that were produced for *al-Kashshāf* to make sure we have not overlooked a lost commentary that somehow has by sheer coincidence adduced the same prophetic tradition on the same verse. Of course other unusual words or combination of words can also be used as textual fingerprints.

I have looked at six new instances in al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf* and compared them to al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi'* and al-Tha'labī's *al-Kashf*. These six verses should be added to the examples I have already adduced in Chapters Five and Six to prove that al-Zamakhsharī did in fact depend on al-Tha'labī's work. Let us first look at the last

²³ All the evidence available indicates that al-Zamakhsharī did not use Ibn Mardawayh's work. Most of my evidence comes from al-Zayla'ī's work. Many of the ḥadīths (other than the merit-of-sura ḥadīths) used by al-Zamakhsharī are only found in al-Tha'labī and they are not even found in other ḥadīth works. These traditions are described as "odd" (*gharīb*) by al-Zayla'ī, indicating that they are not found anywhere, not even in books devoted to fabricated traditions. Moreover, all the ḥadīths that could have come from Ibn Mardawayh are also available in al-Tha'labī's *al-Kashf*. Here are some examples of ḥadīths found only in al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf* that could only be attested in *al-Kashf*: nos. 6, 11, 55, 59, 337, 360. These are just few examples from tens of such ḥadīths; I cannot but draw the conclusion that *al-Kashf* was the book relied upon by al-Zamakhsharī, and not Ibn Mardawayh's book.

phrase in verse 47:35, "and We will not deprive (*yatirakum*) you of your works," and examine how it was interpreted by the three exegetes. Al-Ṭabarī offers a philological interpretation and then quotes early exegetes on the meaning of *yatirakum*.²⁴ Al-Tha'labī quotes the same early exegetes as al-Ṭabarī, yet he delays his philological explanation regarding the word *yatirakum* until after he quotes a prophetic tradition that uses the same word but in a totally different context.²⁵ Al-Zamakhsharī has only a philological interpretation and then quotes the same tradition as the one cited by al-Tha'labī.²⁶

In interpreting verse 50:4, "we know what the earth diminishes of them; with Us is a book recording," we encounter the same phenomenon. Al-Zamakhsharī cites a prophetic tradition as an interpretation for this verse that is not present in al-Ṭabarī's work but present in al-Tha'labī's.²⁷ Three more items in al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation leave no doubt that he was relying exclusively on al-Tha'labī. First, he cites an interpretation from al-Suddī that is not available in al-Ṭabarī but is found in al-Tha'labī. Second he is of the opinion that the "book" in this verse is the eternal book of records "*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*" which is what al-Tha'labī thinks. Al-Ṭabarī gives nothing regarding this book. Finally, this book is protected from demons (*al-shayāṭīn*), a verbatim quotation by al-Zamakhsharī of al-Tha'labī's words.

Al-Zamakhsharī in his interpretation of verse 70:19, "surely man was created fretful," quotes a tradition that has only been related by al-Tha'labī.²⁸ Al-Zamakhsharī does the same in interpreting verse 72:18, where he quotes a prophetic tradition that has only been quoted by al-Tha'labī.²⁹ In this instance the tradition is not attested in the wording given by al-Zamakhsharī anywhere else in the whole of the prophetic corpus, but in al-Tha'labī.³⁰

In the above four verses we have instances where al-Zamakhsharī quotes prophetic traditions that are never mentioned before by al-

²⁴ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 26: 64.

²⁵ *Al-Kashf*, M105, fol. 130(b).

²⁶ *Al-Kashshāf*, v. 3: 460.

²⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 26: 149; al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf*, M105, fol. 174(b); al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 19.

²⁸ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 29: 78-79; *al-Kashf*, M106, fols. 183(b)-184(a); *al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 139-140.

²⁹ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 29: 116-117; *al-Kashf*, M106, fols. 195(a-b); *al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 148.

³⁰ See the comments of al-Zayla'ī, *Takhrīj*, v. 4: 103 (no. 1413).

Ṭabarī in the context of his interpretations. It is highly improbable that al-Zamakhsharī would independently adduce traditions that have been quoted by al-Tha'labī in regard to the same verses. If we remember that these have been random examples from among hundreds, then we realize that it is impossible that al-Zamakhsharī was not using al-Tha'labī.

In the following two examples I will give non-prophetic verbatim quotations from al-Tha'labī in *al-Kashshāf*. In verse 73:5, "Behold, we shall cast upon thee a weighty word," al-Zamakhsharī quotes an anonymous exegete who said that "weighty" here means "not frivolous" (the word in Arabic is *safsāf*).³¹ Al-Ṭabarī does not quote this explanation.³² Al-Tha'labī does have the explanation as well as the source where he found it.³³ If one were to add up only these examples, one would have to admit that this cannot be just an accidental convergence between al-Tha'labī and al-Zamakhsharī. Indeed, almost every verse interpreted by al-Zamakhsharī has signs of being influenced by the approach of al-Tha'labī.

My final example will leave no doubt that al-Zamakhsharī was using the work of al-Tha'labī to mold his own distinctive work. In interpreting verse 51:22, "and in heaven is your provision, and that which you are promised," al-Tha'labī adduces an extra-exegetical anecdote about an uncouth Bedouin who one day heard this verse from al-Aṣma'ī and became a devout ascetic. A few years later the two protagonists met in Mecca and there al-Aṣma'ī would repeat the verse and cause the Bedouin to die.³⁴ This is vintage al-Tha'labī. The story is so cherished by al-Tha'labī that he repeats it twice.³⁵ Let me emphasize here that the story of the Bedouin is neither an interpretation nor a prophetic tradition of related subject matter. It is an admonitory story. Thus the probability that this was ever used before by an exegete other than al-Tha'labī is nil. But the very same story is also reproduced by al-Zamakhsharī in his interpretation of this verse.³⁶ I could adduce here more examples of this sort, but the

³¹ *Al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 153.

³² *Jāmi' al-bayān*, v. 29: 127.

³³ *Al-Kashf*, M106, fol. 199(a). Al-Tha'labī was quoting al-Farrā'. See his *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Shalabī, ed. (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'āmah li-al-Kitāb, 1972), v. 3: 197.

³⁴ *Al-Kashf*, M105, fols. 187(a-b). The story is also found in *Qatlā al-Qur'ān*, see Leiden Or. 998(2) fols. 9(b)-10(a).

³⁵ See note 34.

³⁶ *Al-Kashshāf*, v. 4: 29.

picture should be clear. Al-Tha'labī was not only close at hand, but he was used extensively by al-Zamakhsharī.

Finally, there is evidence that medieval Muslim scholars were fully aware that al-Zamakhsharī had depended on al-Tha'labī for many of the traditions he cites. In the margins of one of the manuscripts of al-Zayla'ī there is a remark that states that one of the traditions that no one has been able to find the origins of and which has been quoted by al-Zamakhsharī comes from al-Tha'labī.³⁷ The remark is attributed to the famous Ibn Ḥajar (d. 852/1448) who himself wrote another *takhrīj* work on *al-Kashshāf*.³⁸ Indeed, most of the prophetic traditions that have been described as "odd" (*gharīb*) and have not been identified are actually from al-Tha'labī.³⁹

My contention in this study has been that al-Zamakhsharī's work belongs to the *madrasa* genre of quranic commentaries and more often than not these type of commentaries were dependent on the encyclopedic tradition. It is clear to me that al-Zamakhsharī's work uses *al-Kashf* as its scaffold. Indeed, the main interlocutor of al-Zamakhsharī was al-Tha'labī. The sarcasm and attacks that al-Zamakhsharī leveled against "certain commentators" have al-Tha'labī as their target. It is not possible to fully appreciate what al-Zamakhsharī was attempting to change without an intimate knowledge of *al-Kashf*.

Al-Tha'labī and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272)

The case of dependency here is easier to establish.⁴⁰ Al-Qurṭubī's work represents a major juncture in a line of encyclopedic Qur'ān commentaries that saw its beginning with al-Ṭabarī. Al-Qurṭubī's

³⁷ Al-Zayla'ī, *Takhrīj*, v. 1: 336 (no. 342). The tradition is indeed in al-Tha'labī's work, see *al-Kashf*, M101, fol. 89(b).

³⁸ The title of this work is *al-Kāfi al-shāfi fi takhrīj ahādīth al-Kashshāf*, published at the end of al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf* (Beirut, 1980) volume four.

³⁹ See tradition no. 448, *Takhrīj*, v. 1: 442, where the author states: "*wa-lam ajid lafẓ al-musannif illā fi tafsīr al-Tha'labī min ghayr sanad wa-lā rāwīn*." See also v. 1: 99, 119, 130.

⁴⁰ Readers should consult Chapters Five and Six, where I have given several examples of how al-Qurṭubī used and adapted material from al-Tha'labī. Indeed, al-Qurṭubī does mention al-Tha'labī by name repeatedly, see for example, *al-Jāmi'*, v. 20: 29, 35, 129, 138, 182, 215, 218. These are just few examples from one volume. For more examples see the index of al-Qurṭubī's commentary issued by Dār al-Kutub al-'ilmiyah, *Fahāris al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, 1989), 150–151. These indices being what they are, they should be used as indicative of what is in a book more than an exhaustive complete indexing.

work was in many respects a continuation of the tradition where al-Tha'labī left off. Encyclopedic Qur'ān commentaries cast their net wide and manage to incorporate most of the new and old exegetical material that preceded them as it has come to be seen through the continuous re-articulation of Sunnī orthodoxy. Nascent trends are given full articulation, obsolete positions which no longer serve orthodoxy are discarded, and new insights are allowed entry into the tradition.

Thus most of al-Tha'labī's work has been incorporated into al-Qurṭubī's, excluding many of the material that by then have become questionable in Sunnī opinion. Most of the Shī'ī material is discarded, or if it is copied, it is there only to be ridiculed. Most of the Sūfī material is copied, with a tendency to drop the names of the authorities that stood behind them. Moreover, al-Qurṭubī's work brings to the surface certain unspoken assumptions that lie at the base of al-Tha'labī's commentary and makes clear to the reader the subtext of many of the interpretations. Thus, one must speak here of a major recasting of the tradition. Of equal significance is that al-Qurṭubī allowed the integration of the Andalusian and North African quranic exegetical tradition into the mainstream of encyclopedic tradition. On the whole most of the material in al-Tha'labī is found in one form or another in al-Qurṭubī. But it is only one part of what al-Qurṭubī was drawing upon.

It is not my intention to follow the influence of al-Tha'labī's work beyond this point in the Sunnī tradition, a project that must await a critical edition of *al-Kashf*. But it should have become clear to the reader that al-Tha'labī's work stood at an important juncture in the history of classical Qur'ān commentary. The major works of the classical tradition are very indebted to his contributions.

2. Sunnī-Shī'ī Polemics and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics

The compromise fashioned by al-Tha'labī between philology and quranic exegesis was inherently unstable. It required not only a tacit consent from the philologists but also the absence of a powerful critique. The arrival of al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) in the picture and the great success of his work meant that philology now posed a formidable threat to Sunnī orthodoxy. Gone were the days when a Sunnī exegete would equate a proper understanding of the Arabic

language of the Qur'ān with the proper Sunnī position. Apparently a Mu'tazilī could claim the same for his own position.

The earliest manifestation that I have found of a detectable unease vis-à-vis philology in Sunnī exegetical circles is in al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272). In the introduction to his monumental work, he warns against hastening to interpret the Qur'ān by the mere knowledge of Arabic language, without controlling the process by traditional knowledge of what the Qur'ān is about.⁴¹ His argument is not only inconsistent, since he seems to imply that traditional knowledge is also philological knowledge, but he seems to posit a level of interpretation that is at odds with the apparent meaning of the text.⁴² The import of his warning, however, is clear: philology cannot claim an unquestioned authority over the meaning of the Qur'ān. Tradition, unclear as that may be in this case, has the final word. Fortunately, al-Qurṭubī was more willing to register his anxiety than to allow such a stand to overhaul his encyclopedic approach.

The situation would be different with the advent of Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728/1328) who played a major role in the consolidation of a new kind of hermeneutics in the classical tradition.⁴³ Ibn Taymīyah would take over the arguments adduced by al-Qurṭubī and elaborate a major statement on the state of *tafsīr* and the need to purify the field. But his manifesto, *Muqaddimah fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, and it was one, would attempt to tackle all the problems that were besetting the Sunnī exegetical enterprise by the seventh/thirteenth century.

First, there were the Mu'tazilīs and their use of philology to buttress their claims. To this end Ibn Taymīyah brushed aside the wishy-washiness of al-Qurṭubī and made clear the implications of putting limits on philology. No philological argument, sound as it is, and no matter how much in accordance with the "linguistics habits of the Arabs," has an authority that can override the traditional Sunnī understanding of the Qur'ān.⁴⁴ Here is an unwaveringly clear position

⁴¹ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, v. 1: 34: "an yutasāra' ilā tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-zāhir al-'arabīyah min ghayr istizhār bi-al-samā' wa-al-naql fīmā yata'llaq bi-gharā'ib al-Qur'ān wa-mā fih min al-alfāz al-mubhamah wa-al-mubdalah, wa-mā fih min al-ikhtisār wa-al-hadhf wa-al-īdmār wa-al-taqdīm wa-al-ta'khīr."

⁴² Ibid., "fa-man lam yuhakkim zāhir al-tafsīr wa-bādar ilā istinbāt al-ma'anī bi-mujarrad fahm al-'arabīyah kathur ghalatuhū."

⁴³ Ibn Taymīyah, though he articulated the new radical hermeneutical theory, never left a substantial commentary. It was left to his student Ibn Kathīr (d. 773/1371) to start the project of overhauling *tafsīr*, that project would culminate in al-Suyūṭī's (d. 911/1505) magisterial *al-Durr al-Manthūr*.

⁴⁴ Ibn Taymīyah, *Muqaddimah*, 35–37.

never before seen in Sunnī exegesis. The fabled philological formula, "according to the linguistic habits of the Arabs," cuts no bone with Ibn Taymīyah. Lest the reader be unclear as to whom he is writing against, Ibn Taymīyah names the Mu'tazilī as the main culprits who use philology without regard for proper traditional understanding.⁴⁵

Thus when Ibn Taymīyah presented his hermeneutical theory, philology had no role to play whatsoever. The Qur'ān was to be interpreted by the Qur'ān itself, by the prophetic *sunnah*, by the interpretation that was collected from the Prophet's Companions (*ṣaḥābah*) and from the Successors of the Companions (*al-tābi'ūn*).⁴⁶ Dogma would have to devour philology if it wanted to live! Yet, Ibn Taymīyah was also attempting to rearrange the hierarchy of quranic commentary texts. His heremeneutical approach resulted in an insistence on not only the primary significance of the first layer of quranic interpretation (the pre-Ṭabarī period), but also a refusal of most of what came after as mere redundancy. The growth of the prophetic tradition was such that the concept of *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* could now be used to undermine the encyclopedic tradition in Sunnī quranic tradition. Not only was Ibn Taymīyah offering a new way of interpreting the Qur'ān but also a new criterion to measure the whole previous production of quranic interpretation.⁴⁷

Ibn Taymīyah found a lot to disparage even among the staunchest authors of the traditional Sunnī camp. The radical hermeneutics theory he was advocating called for the most stringent standards for evaluation of the traditional material collected. If authority is to be invested in the received interpretations of the Qur'ān then these had better be reliable. And Ibn Taymīyah went after any exegete who fell short of the most impeccable of standards (or so he wants us to

⁴⁵ They are too argumentative as he exasperatedly points out, *ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 42–50. Ibn Kathīr, the student of Ibn Taymīyah, would incorporate this formula into his major Qur'ān commentary. On him see Jane McAuliffe, "Quranic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, Andrew Rippin, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 45–62.

⁴⁷ Ibn Taymīyah wants scholars to rely solely on al-Ṭabarī and the early generation of exegetes and those who refused the encyclopedic approach and opted for al-Ṭabarī style commentary, like Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938), Baqī b. Makhḥad (d. 276/889) and Ibn Mardawayh (d. 401/1010). The last three will be championed by al-Suyūṭī. The works of the three are all but lost, and al-Suyūṭī is thus the only preserver of this lost line in the Qur'ān commentary tradition. Some scholars in Saudi Arabia have mounted a considerable effort to recover the work of Ibn Abī Ḥātim. Only one volume survives of his Qur'ān commentary; the effort on the part of the Wahhābī scholars is a testimony of the power of the Ibn Taymīyah manifesto.

believe). And many of the famous exegetes, Ibn Taymīyah asserts, have been less than careful about their material. But his ire and exasperation were directed mostly at al-Tha'labī and his student al-Wāhidī. He accused them of incorporating unsound traditions in their works. It is ironic that Ibn Taymīyah could not accuse them of intentional heresy. They were, according to him, simply inept ḥadīth scholars. Yet, a closer look at the list of those whom he praised and those whom he disparaged reveals a remarkably flagrant inconsistency. Ibn Taymīyah berated al-Tha'labī, al-Wāhidī, and al-Zamakhsharī for relating weak, strange, prophetic traditions regarding the merits of suras.⁴⁸ Yet, a few lines later, Ibn Mardawayh is praised as one of the exegetes one should trust.⁴⁹ Surely, Ibn Taymīyah knew that Ibn Mardawayh had related the very same material. The mistakes of al-Tha'labī certainly did not justify such a harsh treatment; there is more to the matter than meets the eye.⁵⁰

The reader of Ibn Taymīyah's *Muqaddimah* will never guess, let alone suspect, the real reasons behind the attack on al-Tha'labī and his student. Indeed, even when Ibn Taymīyah was asked in the format of a question for a *fatwah* about the most reliable Qur'ān commentaries, his response was rather terse in its reasons for rejecting some of the most important of the works in classical Sunnī tradition.⁵¹ So where does one go in order to know the whole story as to what Ibn Taymīyah was trying to achieve (or undo)? For that, we have to look at another side of his intellectual activities.

The second threat that Ibn Taymīyah was battling was the threat of Shi'ism. It is not yet clear why, since no definitive study has been published on the subject, but by the end of the sixth/twelfth centuries a new form of polemical anti-Sunnī writings was being produced by the Shi'īs. In order to render their arguments more cogent the Shi'ī polemicists resolved to use Sunnī material. This ploy was

⁴⁸ Ibn Taymīyah, *Muqaddimah*, 32.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁰ One of the last classical-style quranic exegetes, al-Qāsimī (d. 1332/1914) would mount the only attempt at salvaging the reputation of al-Tha'labī that I know of among Sunnī scholars after Ibn Taymīyah. He does point to the contradictions in the attacks on al-Tha'labī, stating that all the Sunnī exegetes indulged in reporting things he reported. Unfortunately, this rather surprising attempt to save al-Tha'labī did not succeed. See al-Qāsimī's *Maḥāsīn al-ta'wīl* (Cairo, 1957), v. 1: 41–42.

⁵¹ For historians of classical Qur'ān commentary, the works of Ibn Taymīyah are of great significance, since he mentions what was being read at his time. The *fatwā* has been published at the end of the *Muqaddimah*, 56–58. The similarity of his approach to Luther's *Sui ipsius interpret* is remarkable.

seen as the most effective method, since the evidence could not be easily dismissed—it was after all, Sunnī material. The Sunnī intellectual output was thus ransacked for any material that supported the Shi'ī position. Since al-Tha'labī used Shi'ī material both to neutralize the Shi'ī position and inoculate the Sunnis against Shi'ī propaganda, it was not long before the favor was returned. Shi'ī polemicists found in *al-Kashf* a treasure trove of pro-Shi'ī material. Taken out of its context, it was the most pro-Shi'ī material one could ever come across in Sunnī literature. Indeed, the prestige of al-Tha'labī's work meant that the work was one of the Shi'īs' most precious of finds.

The first Shi'ī scholar that I know of to use *al-Kashf* was Ibn al-Bīṭrīq (d. 600/1203).⁵² He wrote two important polemical works that were the foundation of more famous Shi'ī anti-Sunnī tracts.⁵³ The first was *al-'Umdah fī 'uyūn shihāh al-akhbār*, which collected all the prophetic traditions in Sunnī sources that supported Shi'ī claims. It contained 913 prophetic traditions, of which at least 130 were from al-Tha'labī's *al-Kashf* (or 15% of the material).⁵⁴ But it was his second work, *Kitāb khaṣā'is al-wahy al-mubīn*, that revealed the degree of significance of *al-Kashf* for the Shi'ī polemicists. Of the 202 prophetic traditions, 51 came from *al-Kashf*, or 25% of the material. It is important to point out that most of these prophetic traditions were interpretations of quranic verses. Thus when the Shi'ī polemicists argued that the Qur'ān was referring to 'Alī and the Shi'ī cause, they primarily relied on al-Tha'labī to buttress their claims. It is this fact that made al-Tha'labī too costly a burden on the Sunnī camp. Ibn Taymīyah would see to it that the situation was corrected.

⁵² According to this author he was the first to write such polemical works, and he does seem to brag about that fact enough to be taken seriously, see the introduction to his *al-'Umdah fī 'uyūn shihāh al-akhbār* (Iran, 1309/1892), v. 1: 3. Neither the *Encyclopedia of Islam* nor the *Encyclopedia Iranica* has an entry on this scholar. Brockelmann has a short entry, see *GA*, *SI*, 710–711. On Ibn al-Bīṭrīq, see *Rawḍāt al-jannāt* (Beirut, 1991) v. 8: 180–181; Muḥsin al-Amīn, *A'yān al-Shi'ah*, Ḥasan al-Amīn, ed. (Beirut, 1986), v. 10: 289.

⁵³ See the remarks of Eran Kohlberg in his "Alī b. Mūsā ibn Ṭāwūs and his Polemic against Sunnism," in *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner, ed. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 341, note 82. Needless to say this part of the present chapter would not have been possible without the pioneering work of Kohlberg. I have relied heavily on his bibliographical work on Shi'ī scholars to identify the works that used al-Tha'labī.

⁵⁴ Ibn al-Bīṭrīq, *al-'Umdah*, v. 1: 9.

Two scholar brothers, Ahmad ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 673/1275) and 'Alī ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266), would continue the production of anti-Sunnī tractates in their scholarship.⁵⁵ Al-Tha'labī figured prominently in their works. These polemical works seem to have left a great impact on the intellectual atmosphere of medieval Islam.⁵⁶ Ibn Taymīyah was fully aware of this rich literature, and he decided to answer a contemporary scholar, Jamāl al-Dīn Ḥasan b. Yūsuf b. al-Muṭahhar, known as al-'Allāmah al-Ḥillī (d. 726/1325), who wrote what was seen as the definitive anti-Sunnī polemic.⁵⁷ Al-Ḥillī's tractate, *Minhāj al-Karāmah fī ithbāt al-imāmah*, was not only an attack on Sunnism but a systematic defense of Shī'ī doctrines.⁵⁸ It is still considered one of the most eloquent and cogent defenses of Shi'ism. One look at al-Ḥillī's work reveals that al-Tha'labī's material is at the center of his argument that Shi'ism is the right sect. In particular, al-Tha'labī figures prominently in the section devoted to "proofs from the Qur'ān on the legitimate leadership of 'Alī."⁵⁹

The work Ibn Taymīyah wrote to refute al-'Allāmah al-Ḥillī's tractate would become his most extensive and important work. This in itself shows the degree of anxiety Shī'ī polemics generated among Sunnī intellectuals. The work, *Minhāj al-Sunnah al-nabawīyah fī naqd kalām al-Shī'ah al-qadāriyah*, is one of Ibn Taymīyah's most intellectually engaging. It is nothing short of a grand restatement of the Sunnī worldview.⁶⁰ Since al-Tha'labī played a major role in al-'Allāmah's work we should not be surprised to learn that Ibn Taymīyah has a lot to say about al-Tha'labī.

It is in this light that we have to understand Ibn Taymīyah's discomfort with al-Tha'labī. Ibn Taymīyah's attacks on al-Tha'labī and

⁵⁵ On 'Alī b. Mūsā see Etan Kohlberg's article mentioned above, see also his *A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work: Ibn Ṭāwūs and His Library* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992); on his brother Ahmad see the article of Asma Afsaruddin, "Constructing Narratives of Monition and Guile: The Politics of Interpretation" *Arabica* 48 (2001): 315-351.

⁵⁶ Especially since converting the Mongol monarchs was at stake.

⁵⁷ Ibn Taymīyah knows of Ibn al-Bīrīq and the Ibn Ṭāwūs brothers, among others. See *Minhāj al-Sunnah al-nabawīyah fī naqd kalām al-Shī'ah al-qadāriyah*, Muḥammad Sālim, ed. (Saudi Arabia, 1986), v. 7: 96, 400. His decision to refute al-Ḥillī's work is another sign of the acumen of Ibn Taymīyah. Al-Ḥillī's works are among the most authoritative in Shī'ī scholarly tradition.

⁵⁸ This work, like most of this kind of literature, was published in the 19th century in Iran in lithograph prints. The edition of *Minhāj al-karāmah* that I am using was published in 1294/1877.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 52: *fī al-adillāh al-ma'khūdhah min al-Qur'ān wa-al-barāhīn al-dāllah 'alā imāmat 'Alī 'alayhi al-salām min al-kutub al-'azīz*.

⁶⁰ It is unfortunate that we have no English study of this work.

his school were thus motivated by two considerations. The first is methodological: al-Tha'labī belonged to the Sunnī encyclopedic tradition of quranic exegesis that Ibn Taymīyah saw as unreliable. The second is polemical: al-Tha'labī had now become a liability in the Sunnī camp. One cannot understand Ibn Taymīyah's assessment of the heritage of quranic exegesis without taking into consideration the polemical wars between the Sunnīs and the Shī'īs.

In order to undermine al-Tha'labī's authority, Ibn Taymīyah accused him of shoddy scholarship.⁶¹ Al-Tha'labī was no ḥadīth scholar and was thus unable to discern authentic from fabricated. He was a "lousy nocturnal wood-gatherer" (*ḥāṭib layl*), thus unable to see what he was collecting. But the attack on al-Tha'labī meant that Ibn Taymīyah would also have to go after those who were heavily influenced by him. Thus al-Wāhidī is not spared, and so too others who seem not to have been aware of al-Tha'labī's unprofessional credentials. It is this blow dealt by Ibn Taymīyah, both to al-Tha'labī and to the encyclopedic quranic exegetical tradition, that eventually allows the consolidation of *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* Qur'ān commentaries.

Al-Tha'labī's reputation never fully recovered from this attack. Ibn Taymīyah's assessment of the worth of al-Tha'labī would be incorporated into one of the most important of medieval manuals on quranic sciences, *al-Itqān* of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).⁶² Eventually, this assessment would be elaborated upon and enshrined in one of the most influential of modern Islamic histories of exegesis, *al-Tafsīr wa-al-mufasssīrūn*, which was written by Muḥammad al-Dhahabī.⁶³ The language of al-Dhahabī degenerates into a most inappropriate ad hominem attack on al-Tha'labī. Indeed, another modern Muslim Wahhābī scholar explicitly hopes that *al-Kashf* does not get published unless it is expurgated and purified from the multitudes of corruptions that it contains.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Volume 7 of *Minhāj al-Sunnah* is fully devoted to al-Tha'labī; Ibn Taymīyah is merciless throughout.

⁶² Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Sa'īd al-Mandūh (Beirut, 1996), v. 4: 501; see also v. 4: 498.

⁶³ Muḥammad al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa-al-mufasssīrūn*, v. 1: 228-234, esp. 234.

⁶⁴ 'Alī Muḥammad al-Zubayrī, *Ibn Juz'ī wa-manhajuh fī al-tafsīr* (Damascus, 1987), v. 1: 248. Needless to say this author is basing his claims on Ibn Taymīyah's assessment. He also regrets the fact that *al-Kashf* was a very influential commentary that left its nefarious marks on the tradition.

CONCLUSION

The remarkable influence that al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary had on the subsequent history of quranic exegesis is, on closer examination, not surprising. Al-Tha'labī lived in Khurasan at the height of its intellectual influence.¹ Nishapur, by the time it became the center of Saljuq expansion to the East, had been turned into the storehouse of illustrious figures for the Islamic world. Whether in philosophy, theology, philology or exegesis, the area produced scholars that dominated the subsequent development of their respective fields. Al-Tha'labī, with his teacher Ibn Ḥabīb and his student al-Wāḥidī, presided over a school of interpretation that transformed the exegetical tradition. The history of this school, especially since the works of the teacher and student are still unedited, remains to be fully explored.² Yet it is sufficiently clear from my own work that al-Tha'labī's commentary was a crucial link in the development of medieval quranic exegesis.

Al-Tha'labī managed to unite the different trends of the flourishing Islamic culture around him. A study of his background has proved fruitful in disentangling the different currents that influenced his outlook. Perhaps what is most fascinating about the man is his ability to unite high Islamic culture, its ḥadīth, poetry, philology and *adab*, with the pietistic elements of the culture of the masses: the elements that came to constitute the inner religious life of ordinary Muslims. The synthesis was remarkable. The Qur'ān commentary that he produced was both a record of three hundred years of the history of quranic exegesis, and a contemporary document that reflected the sensibilities of his fellow Muslims and how they felt and viewed the place of the Qur'ān in their lives. We have to abandon the notion

¹ Medieval scholars were aware that Khurasan (and hence Nishapur) was the place to be in order to gain influence among fellow scholars. In the biography of Ibn Mardawayh a biographer sardonically remarks that were Ibn Mardawayh from Khurasan his reputation would have been greater than any. See the remarks in al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lam al-nubalā'*, v. 17: 309.

² Two of al-Wāḥidī's commentaries have been edited. I am in the process of preparing a study of his major work, *al-Basīṭ*, which is still unedited.

that Qur'ān commentaries of the medieval period were merely reproductions of each other and that they fail to reflect the age in which they were written. *Al-Kāshf* is nothing if not a document that records the cultural trends and sensibilities of fifth century Nishapur.

One aspect of al-Tha'labī's Qur'ān commentary that stands out and encompasses all other characteristics is the encyclopedic nature of its composition. One of the ideological justifications for a Qur'ān commentary that brims with a medley of assorted matters was the growing conviction among Muslims that the Qur'ān as the word of God is all-encompassing. Al-Tha'labī is thus the first Qur'ān commentator to write a classical encyclopedic commentary, and he ushered in the age of super-commentaries. No author who wrote after al-Tha'labī managed to overlook his method, his contributions and additions to the tradition. Al-Tha'labī wrote with an eye on the newly founded schools and their students and professors who needed access to comprehensive material unencumbered by long *isnāds*. But more importantly he saw the need to preserve the tradition of comprehensiveness that was initiated by al-Ṭabarī and record the developments that occurred in quranic exegesis since al-Ṭabarī's time. Al-Tha'labī gave special attention to post-Ṭabarī commentators and to his contemporaries, in effect saving the material from the fourth century for later generations. This meant opening the tradition to the new trends, like mysticism, pietistic interpretation, prophetic ḥadīth and *adab* sensibility.

By deciding to have a complete record of the previous commentators before him, including commentators from the formative or pre-Ṭabarī period, al-Tha'labī redid the work of al-Ṭabarī, if only in a more inclusive manner, though he sacrificed the *isnāds* for each tradition in the process. One of the major innovations of al-Tha'labī in *tafsīr* was to drop the heavy use of *isnāds* in his commentary. By that time, *ahl al-ḥadīth* (the conservative camp) had won the ideological battles for authority, lessening the need for obsessive *isnād* citations—*isnād* being the basis for their claim to authority. Accordingly, Muslim scholars had moved away from supplying the *isnāds* of early material. The dropping of *isnād* in the body of the commentary explains the popularity of al-Tha'labī's work, since it was easier to use than the cumbersome work of al-Ṭabarī. Al-Tha'labī's work would eventually lose its popularity among the Sunnīs due to the chilling effect of the use of his work in the Sunnī-Shī'ī polemical wars, but not before it had totally changed the craft of exegesis.

The fact that al-Tha'labī's commentary was a composite commentary, a commentary that assembled all the previously available material, meant that Islamic exegetical tradition had two distribution points. Or put differently, the early exegetical tradition was reassembled twice, independently in each case, once by al-Ṭabarī with full *isnāds*, and once by al-Tha'labī without the *isnāds*. We are thus fortunate to have two records of the early material. The publication of an edition of al-Tha'labī's work will go a long way in helping us to study the development of the early history of quranic exegesis.

But the achievement of al-Tha'labī does not stop here. His insistence on incorporating the prophetic ḥadīth into the body of his commentary would radically transform the nature and the tenor of Qur'ān commentary. Indeed, because of al-Tha'labī's incorporation of these ḥadīths, Qur'ān commentary as containing both the word of God and the prophetic word became the font of Islamic life. Many were the challenges faced by the Qur'ān in vying for the prime place in the hearts of the Muslims; we should not forget that the Qur'ān has little in the way of a formal role in Islamic liturgy, and thus there is a great unvoiced ambivalence as to its value as a devotional source. Mystical poetry, devotional poetry, invocations, belle-lettres, dance and *dhikr* competed for the heart of the devout believer, and the Qur'ān was not necessarily assured of a victory; in retrospect the victory is so complete that we are prone to think that the case was always so. Al-Tha'labī was instrumental in assuring the Qur'ān a formal position as a medium for devotion. Tying the Qur'ān with the prophetic tradition was the best way to guarantee the relevance of the Qur'ān to a Muslim community where the Sunnah of the prophet was at the heart of its devotional inspiration.

I have also attempted in this book to present a new approach to the study of quranic exegesis, one based on a close reading of these texts. The misconceptions about as well as misunderstandings of medieval exegetical literature in modern scholarship are still widespread. The multiplicity of meanings offered by medieval exegetes for a certain verse is seen as obfuscation on the part of these exegetes; others see it as sheer ignorance. Indeed, when it comes to the value of the insights of medieval exegetes into the meaning of the Qur'ān there is a sense that they have nothing to offer.

The tenor of this modern approach has to change. One could argue that the complexity of this literature has in many ways stood in the way of our appreciating its richness. The quranic exegetical

tradition is one of the most complex of Islamic literatures, on a par with mystical poetry and the philosophical tradition, and thus worthy of every ounce of our attention. The ten aspects that I charted in Chapters Five and Six are angles from which to view any exegetical work from medieval times. But the only method to any analysis of this literature is one based on close reading, a reading that functions at two levels: the micro-reading of a given text, and the macro-reading which involves a comparative reading of this particular text with texts that preceded and followed it. As a genealogical literature, quranic exegesis exhibits remarkable similarity to what preceded it and also stark differences.

I have also attempted in this book to chart a preliminary sketch of the genealogical relationships between the different quranic commentaries. I used the history of the reception of *al-Kashf* as a basis for my investigations. But we have only begun to realize the richness and complexity of these genealogical relationships. The one I have found most intriguing is the one that Ibn Taymīyah tried, as it were retroactively, to chart, the Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Baqī b. Makhḥad, and Ibn Mardawayh chain. It is not clear if there is a genealogical relationship among these authors, and if there is, we are not yet in a position to ascertain what it is. None of the works of these authors survives. Al-Suyūṭī's work, the only work to have relied heavily on these authors, is thus a fundamental source for us. We await a study of this work.

The other aspect we know almost nothing about is that of the scholastic glosses on the commentaries. *Al-Kashshāf* of al-Zamakhsharī would become the classic exegetical text to comment upon, and the number of glosses on this work is staggering. The trend seems to have gained momentum after the seventh/thirteenth century. Unless we study the history of these glosses we will remain seriously unable to assess the development of *tafsīr* tradition. This line of exegetical writing has, I have come to realize, to be considered as a distinct sub-genre inside this tradition. Thus to the encyclopedic and *madrasa* style of Qur'ān commentaries that I have proposed for dividing the genre, we will have to add the scholastic glosses as another field to study. It is quite sobering to realize that no studies on these glosses have been written so far. The *tafsīr* field is in dire need of monograph studies on individual commentators and individual glosses. Consequently, for a long time to come, we will have to keep our knowledge of the history of exegetical tradition in the provisional mode.

The surprises one encounters in the field of *tafsīr* are fascinating.

When I started working on al-Tha'labī, I never thought that Sunnī-Shi'ī polemical history would be drawn into the picture. Yet it has become evident to me that it is impossible to understand this polemical history without a proper study of *al-Kashf*. More importantly, it seems that the study of philology after the fifth/twelfth century moves from a focus on poetry to a focus on the Qur'ān. Thus other fields were being radically affected because of the activities of Qur'ān commentators. In this sense the study of the quranic commentary tradition is fundamental to an understanding of the intellectual history of Islamic civilization. Neglecting the incorporation of *tafsīr* as a fundamental component in the study of the intellectual history of Islam has been a very unfortunate oversight. *Tafsīr* is an integral part of the intellectual landscape of Islam and a study of this literature is fundamental to our understanding of Islamic intellectual history.

POSTSCRIPT

Just as I finished this book, an edition of *al-Kashf* of al-Tha'labī came out in Beirut. The editor, Mr. 'Alī 'Āshūr, or Abī Muḥammad ibn 'Āshūr, is a Shī'ī scholar. He is also an *imām*, a Shī'ī Muslim cleric. That the work should be edited by a Shī'ī scholar is a fitting, if ironic, fate for this commentary. Having been dumped by the Sunnī camp, it is now resuscitated by a Shī'īte. If one is to take the past history of the work as a guide, a Sunnī refutation is soon to be expected. The editor, subtle as he is in hiding his motive—he scrupulously avoids mentioning al-Majlisī's (d. 1110/1700) assessment of al-Tha'labī as a tolerant Sunnī or more probably, as al-Majlisī, with tongue in cheek claims, a Shī'ī—could not resist stating that al-Tha'labī had “mentioned the merits (*faḍā'il*, virtues) of People of the House (*ahl al-bayt*), may God bless them, when he discussed the verses that were sent down concerning them, especially the verses which were revealed concerning 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, may God bless his face, virtues which were related from the pious generations (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*).”² The dig against the Sunnīs is hard to miss. Stating that “the pious generations” are the ones who related material which tied quranic verses to 'Alī is nothing but a politely hidden polemical statement.³

Unfortunately, the value of the edition is gravely compromised by its failure to use any of the manuscripts that I have discussed in Appendix 1. Indeed, the editor has used only four volumes to produce

¹ Al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār* (Tehran, 1956), v. 1: 25. By al-Majlisī's time al-Tha'labī's work had moved from being central in anti-Sunnī polemical works into mainstream Shī'ī works. Al-Khwānsārī would copy al-Majlisī's remarks and offers a long explanation that tries to show that al-Tha'labī's Shī'ism is not as improbable as one might think at first! See, his *Rawḍāt al-jannāt* (Beirut: al-Dār al-Islāmiyah, 1991), v. 1: 256.

² Al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa-al-bayān al-ma'rūf bi-tafsīr al-Tha'labī*, 'Alī 'Āshūr, ed. (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-turāth al-'arabī, 2002), v. 1: 10. I am grateful to Professor Andrew Rippin who alerted me in time for the publication of *al-Kashf*.

³ By the ninth volume the editor throws any caution to the wind and offers the reader, in a rather lengthy footnote, a small treatise on the merits of 'Alī, his precedence in Islam, and his uncontested rights. This edition of the work should be seen as the latest round in the polemical wars between the Sunnīs and the Shī'īs. See *ibid.*, v. 9: 232–235.

his edition. For suras 1–17 he has only one very corrupted witness to rely on, and for suras 30–114, the rest of the Qurʾān, he also has one corrupt witness. Thus 80% of *al-Kashf* is reproduced on the basis of one exemplar. Only suras 18–29 are edited using three manuscript witnesses. The result is an edition full of lacunae and uncertain readings, a departure from even the bare minimum of the “editorial” traditions of the Middle East, where usually a fine witness is used to reproduce a certain work. Indeed, the whole of the commentary on sura 114 is missing. This is not the place for a close assessment of the merit of this edition. But all things being equal, it is a welcome effort that hopefully will spur others to produce a critical edition.⁴

⁴ Since not even al-Ṭabarī is properly edited, and for that matter one can dispute the academic worth of many of the “editions” being produced in the Muslim world, scholars have to content themselves with what is available and rely on early manuscripts when in doubt.

APPENDIX ONE

MANUSCRIPTS

There are about one hundred and twenty volumes of manuscripts of *al-Kashf* scattered around the world.¹ This high number of copies reflects the popularity of the work in medieval times. Unfortunately, ninety percent of these copies are individual volumes of multi-volume sets that are no longer complete. I have been able to locate only one complete copy of the work by a single scribe. This appendix describes manuscripts of the greatest importance to this study. Manuscripts that I consulted once are not described here. The recent Beirut edition of *al-Kashf* is of no use for any proper scholarly study since it is unreliable.

Al-Kashf is an extensive work by any standard. Individual volumes of the work are found in most of the European Oriental collections, as well as in the Muslim world. During the past decade I have been able to inspect all the major manuscript collections apart from the one in St. Petersburg.

The manuscript tradition of the work can be divided into two major branches. One is a branch that transmits the text unexpurgated with no editorial change or interference; most of the manuscripts belong to it. The second branch shows signs of major editorial changes and alterations. Most of the manuscripts that belong to the latter are of North African provenance.

The Maḥmūdīyah copy

Originally this copy consisted of 13 volumes of about 200 folios each. Unfortunately four of the 13 volumes (the fifth, eighth, ninth, and tenth) are missing. The remaining nine volumes are currently housed in the Maḥmūdīyah collection in the Public Library of Medina (Maktabat al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah al-ʿāmmah) in Saudi Arabia. In 1973 an

¹ *Al-Fihris al-shāmil lil-turāth al-ʿArabī al-Islāmī al-makhṭūṭ, ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, Makhṭūṭāt al-tafsīr* (ʿAmmān, 1987), v. 1: 134–153.

Arab League cultural delegation headed by Mr. Qāsim al-Khaṭṭāṭ visited Saudi Arabia and microfilmed many of the manuscripts in that country. Among the works that were microfilmed were these volumes of *al-Kashf*.² The description offered below is based on print-outs of these microfilms. I will refer to this set of copies by the letter M.

Each of the nine volumes has a *waqf* (charitable endowment) note stating that this work was intended as a *waqf* for the benefit of the Muslims and the donor was a certain Muḥammad 'Ābid b. al-shaykh Aḥmad 'Alī b. Muḥammad Murād al-Anṣārī. The book was donated to the library of the school in Dhū al-Qa'dah 1249 Hijri (1833).³

The 13 volumes of this set were written during a span of six years from Thursday 15 of Jumādā al-Awwal 624 H. to 24 of Rabī' al-Akhir 630 H. (1226–1232).⁴ The final product does reveal the care that went into this process. I am of the opinion that this manuscript reflects a reading-with-a-master-while-copying the work. That is, the scribe was also reading the work with its transmitter.⁵ The scribe, a certain Ḥāmid b. Muḥammad b. 'Abdak al-Shatrī, wrote the work in al-Fayyūm in Egypt.⁶ He is also the transmitter of the work. I have been unable to identify him in biographical sources. Apparently he was a professional scholar-scribe, for not only is the script one of the most magnificent of *naskhī* specimens stemming from medieval times (according to the description of the Arab League cataloger, and indeed it is excellent), but it was a copy that he made for himself. Strangely enough, our scribe copied the work starting with the last volume and proceeded backwards to the first. I have no explanation for this, nor am I aware that this was the habit of scribes in copying multi-volume works.

Four criteria, namely date, completeness, lack of expurgation, and transmission history, make M the most reliable important manuscript we have of the work and thus the one that I have decided to use as the basis of this book. First, it is one of the earliest and most complete of the copies we have of *al-Kashf*. There exist indeed two more complete versions of the work in Istanbul, but these were

² *Majallat Ma'had al-Makhtūṭāt al-'Arabīyah* 23:2 (1977): 3.

³ The best legible of these *waqf* notes is the one in M99, fol. 2(a).

⁴ The dates are taken from the colophons of the last volume M107, fol. 195(a) and the first volume M98, fol. 187(a) respectively.

⁵ If this assessment on my part is true, then we have in M a unique document that reflects the process by which books were transmitted from their *rāwīs* (transmitters).

⁶ The colophon of M107, fol. 195(a).

copied at least four hundred years after M.⁷ Likewise, there are other manuscripts that predate M, but they are only fragments of the work and some are badly preserved. M has complete *asānīd*, and obscure passages that have not been improved. Furthermore, the scribe has collated his copy with at least two other copies, and supplied ample variant readings for many words in the margins. This feature of thorough collation is unique to this copy and shows the degree of care the scribe took in transmitting a reliable version of the work.

In addition, M is the only copy that states unequivocally that it was transmitted from the author by al-Wāḥidī, his trusted student, then down a line of transmitters to the scribe. The work actually starts with the chain of the transmitters (*ruwāt*) of the work. Of the five individuals in this chain, only two were unidentifiable, the others being well-known scholars who can be independently identified on the basis of the biographical dictionaries. The existence of this chain at the head of the work is a clear proof that the copy is authoritative, and thus makes this copy of paramount importance in any study of the work. Short of finding an autograph of the work, M will remain the most important evidence we have of *al-Kashf*.

The Chain of transmitters of M

Since the chain of transmitters of the work acts as the seal of authenticity for M, it will be reproduced here with all the biographical information available on the individual transmitters.⁸ The *riwāyah* which runs for 3 lines has suffered some damage in the first and second line at the extreme right side. Here is a complete transliteration:

⁷ A late copy could, of course, be better exemplar than an earlier copy, but the case is not so here.

⁸ For more examples of chains of transmission at the head of works, see Sībawayhi, *al-Kūb*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Ḥārūn (Cairo: Dār al-Qalam, 1966), v. 1: 3–11; cf. Gregor Schoeler, "Weiters zur Frage der schriftlichen oder mündlichen Überlieferung der Wissenschaft im Islam," *Der Islam* 66 (1989): 51, where he states: "Ein Blick auf die ununterbrochene Reihe der (basrischen) Überlieferer des Kitāb Sībawaihi läßt schon vermuten, daß bei der Weitertradierung des Werkes- bzw. der Handschriften des Werkes- etwas entstehen könnte, das es im Text selbst des Buches nicht gibt: Überliefererketten, die denjenigen der Traditionsgelehrten gleichen; Isnāde, in denen die Tradenten, angefangen vom letzten Besitzer der Handschrift bis hin zum Verfasser, in möglichst ununterbrochener Folge genannt werden. Gute Handschriften bringen vor Beginn des eigentlichen Textes solche Isnāde (künftig: Eingangsisnāde)." (my emphasis).

akhbaranā (...) (...) (...) *al-[m]uqrī* Abū 'Imrān Mūsā b. 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Jazarī qāla *akhbaranī al-shaykh al-imām al-awḥad al-ḥāfiẓ Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh b. 'Alī* (...) *al-Tikrītī bihā fī Shawwāl sanat ihdā wa-thamānīn wa-khamsimī*⁹ qāla: *akhbaranī al-shaykh al-imām baqīyat al-sharaf Abū al-Faḍl b. Abī al-Khayr al-Mīhanī qāla: akhbaranī al-shaykh al-imām Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī qāla: akhbaranā al-ustādh al-muṣannif.*

This chain allows for a reconstruction of the route of transmission (*Eingangsisnād*, to use Schoeler's term) that the work has undergone. Here is a diagrammatic representation of the chain starting from the author to the scribe:

- The author: Al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035)
|
1- His student al-Wāḥidī (d. 486/1076)
|
2- Abū al-Faḍl, Aḥmad b. Ṭāhir al-Mīhanī (b. 464/1071-d. 549/1154)⁹
|
3- Abū Muḥammad, 'Abd Allāh b. 'Alī b. Suwaydah al-Tikrītī
(d. 584/1188)¹⁰
|
4- Abū 'Imrān, Mūsā b. 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Jazarī (was still alive
between 580-630/1184-1232). He transmitted *al-Kaṣf* from al-Tikrītī in
581/1185 in Tikrīt in Iraq¹¹
|
5- Ḥāmid b. Muḥammad b. Ḥāmid b. 'Abdak al-Shatrī (was still alive
between 620-630/1223-1232). He is the transmitter and the scribe of
the manuscript M.

⁹ His full name is: Aḥmad b. Ṭāhir b. Sa'īd b. al-Qudwah Abī Sa'īd Faḍl Allāh b. Abī al-Khayr al-Miyhanī. He was a Ṣūfī and a scholar who traveled extensively in the Islamic world in search of knowledge. Eventually he settled down in Baghdad and died there. His biographer explicitly states that he transmitted the works of al-Wāḥidī (*wa-lahu ijāzah min al-mufasssīr Abī al-Ḥasan al-Wāḥidī rawā bihā tafāsīrahu*); thus we have an external corroboration of the authenticity of the chain at the head of M. See al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, v. 20: 196-197.

¹⁰ The biographical dictionaries give his full name as: 'Abd Allāh b. 'Alī b. 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar b. Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. Suwaydah al-Tikrītī. He is described as an historian of his native town Tikrīt and a scholar of ḥadīth. Apparently some scholars of ḥadīth did not trust his character and some dictionaries have only censure to report about him. See al-Ziriklī, *al-A'lām*, v. 4: 105; and Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Lisān al-mīzān* (Haydarabād, 1911), v. 3: 319.

¹¹ I was unable to identify this scholar. The epithet Jazarī indicates that he came from northern Iraq.

Of the five transmitters, the last two (nos. 4 and 5) remain unidentified in the biographical dictionaries. That, however, does not diminish the value of the chain. Al-Mīhanī (no. 2) was well known as a transmitter of works from al-Wāḥidī. His travels in search of knowledge were extensive and he eventually settled in Baghdad, where he must have met al-Tikrītī (no. 3) who transmitted the work from him. Al-Jazarī (no. 4) is the one we know the least about. We can only guess that he was active in Iraq.

Although I have been unable to find any reference to al-Shatrī (no. 5), the scribe of the manuscript, his existence seems undeniable, for the simple fact that the manuscript is written by his own hand. Since he stands at the end of transmitters of this work, he must have been a scholar who had an interest in the exegesis of the Qur'ān. Furthermore, he not only had beautiful handwriting but was a meticulous copyist, for it took him six years to copy the work—years that have left us with a work of great accuracy and correctness. This means that he was reading the work with the scholar as he was copying it. He has checked his work repeatedly (one can tell that from his notes on the margin). He was also a fastidious scholar who supplied the work with marginalia taken from other commentaries and dictionaries. The result is a masterpiece of scholarly achievement. It is also a lavish copy since the work is spread over 13 volumes, instead of the usual 4 or 5. There are also indisputable indications that this work was copied by al-Shatrī for his personal use. In the colophon of M99 he states that he is the owner of the copy. In addition, the work remained part of the family inheritance, something that can be verified from the *ex libris* note that states that the work was in the property of one of the sons of the scribe.¹² With only 200 years separating the author and our copy, and the fact that M is also the only copy supplied with a transmitters' chain, the Maḥmūdīyah remains our most important evidence of the work to have been preserved.¹³

¹² See below for more on this *ex libris* note.

¹³ The biographical tradition has persevered two other lines of transmission for al-Tha'labī's *al-Kaṣf*. The first is supplied by Ibn Abī al-Khayr in his *Fahrasat mā rawāhu 'an shuyūkhūh*, ed. Franciscus Codera (Baghdad, 1963), 59. The second is mentioned by Ibn al-Bitrīq in his *Kitāb khaṣā'is al-wahy al-mubīn*, ed. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Maḥmūdī (Tehran, 1986), 22.

Maḥmūdīyah 98 (M98)

This is the first volume of the copy. It originally consisted of 187 folios but has now only 158. The absence of 29 folios can be easily detected because of the existence of two pagination systems in the manuscript, one before the folios were lost and another after the loss. The loss occurred between folio 21 and 51 of the original pagination.¹⁴ The missing folios contain most of the commentary on sura 1. M 98 has also suffered extensive damage (ex. ff. 102, 101, 102, 123, 135), where the writing has been erased or the paper torn away. Many of the folios have come loose and were rebound too close to the text such that some of the writing has disappeared under the binding.

The title page is also badly damaged, which is regrettable since we can barely make out the directory for the abbreviations used by the scribe in the marginalia. Thus, the definition of the abbreviation ṣḥ is legible: it stands for quotations from *Ṣiḥāḥ* of al-Jawharī. Another work that he consulted was *kitāb al-gharībayn* of al-Harawī and the abbreviation for that is gh. From the little one can read of this directory, it is clear that the scribe had at his disposal a copy of the abridged version of *al-Kashf* which was made by al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 520/1126, also known as Ibn Abī Randaqah), which he used as another witness for his version.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the symbol for the quotations from this abridged version is not legible; however, he does occasionally refer to the work by its full name, "*mukhtaṣar al-Ṭurṭūshī*," where he states that al-Ṭurṭūshī's copy has a different reading which he quotes.¹⁶ One can also read the name al-Farrā', which means the scribe consulted the *Ma'ānī*.

If we examine the marginalia themselves, we can recognize several types, each designated by an abbreviation or an identification tag. The most common marginalia are for variant readings from other copies of the work for single words, and these are introduced by the letter ḥ. The ḥ is usually written above the variant.¹⁷ The scribe alerted the reader to these variant readings by drawing a line on top of the word in question (in the shape of a horizontal T), which

¹⁴ Any reference to the folios of this volume would use the new pagination.

¹⁵ On al-Ṭurṭūshī see Brockelmann, GAS I 459, SI 829-830; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, v. 4: 262-265; al-Ziriklī, *al-A'lām*, v. 7: 13-134. Some manuscripts of this abridged version are available in Cairo.

¹⁶ See M99, f. 94(b) where he says: *fī nuskhat al-Ṭurṭūshī*...

¹⁷ M98, fol. 9(b), 15(a, b).

usually points to the variant written on the same line in the margin.

This ḥ is the only symbol introducing single variants, while the other marginalia are in the form of copious quotations. Some of these are introduced by the letter ṣ, others by ṭ, and still others by kh.¹⁸ In other instances the marginalia are introduced by the statement *qāla* x (x said). The marginalia dwindle considerably as we proceed through this volume.¹⁹ Eventually only the variant readings introduced with ḥ are what we encounter. I am unable to venture any opinion on why this is the case.

Each page of M98 has 19 lines measuring 21 cm in length and 15 cm in width. These measurements hold true for all the volumes of this copy. According to the Arab League cataloger the paper is brittle and very dark. I am unable to report on the binding since that was not microfilmed nor described by the catalogers.

This volume stops at verse 176 of sura 2 (*al-Baqarah*). The colophon states that the scribe finished copying this volume on the 24th of Rabī' al-Ākhir 630 A.H.

Maḥmūdīyah 99 (M99)

This is the second volume of the copy and it commences where the first ended, i.e. at 2:177, and ends with the end of this sura (*al-Baqarah*). Maḥmūdīyah 99 is one of the largest of the surviving volumes, being comprised of 217 folios. The volume is impeccably preserved and only the colophon has suffered some damage. The volume was finished on the 17th of Jumādā al-Ākhirah 629 A.H. In the colophon the scribe refers to himself as the owner of the work (*wa-mālikih*), which corroborates our view that he was a scholar and that the copy was for his personal use. The marginalia consist only of variant readings which were designated with the letter ḥ.

Maḥmūdīyah 100 (M100)

The third volume of the copy consists of the whole commentary on sura 3 (*Āl Imrān*). M100 has 178 folios of exquisite beauty and perfect condition. The only damage this volume has suffered occurs in the first folio where the first 3 words of the last 6 lines have been

¹⁸ For ṣ see M98, fol. 22(b); for ṭ fol. 26(a); for kh fol. 37(a).

¹⁹ The last copious marginalia are found on fol. 92(b).

erased. It is clear that fewer and fewer readers perused beyond the first and second volumes because the condition of the latter volumes improves dramatically. This volume was finished on the 20th of Šafar 629 A.H.

Maḥmūdīyah 101 (M101)

Although the title page of the fourth volume is badly damaged, one is still able to read an inscription which states that the book was in the property of Muḥammad b. Ḥāmid b. Muḥammad b. Ḥāmid (... ..) al-Shāfi'i. This is none other than the son of the scribe, indicating that this copy was for a while part of his family inheritance.

M101 covers the whole of sura 4 (*al-Nisā'*) and it consists of 149 folios. The volume is in very good condition apart from a slight smudge in the ink of the first 10 folios. The scribe finished copying this volume on the 8th of Ramaḍān 628 A.H.

Maḥmūdīyah 102 (M102)

This is, in fact, the sixth volume of the original copy. Volume 5 has unfortunately been lost. M102 has suffered extensively: almost 75 folios have been torn from its beginning. There is thus no title page and we are only able to ascertain that this is volume six from the colophon. The volume commences as it stands now with the commentary on verse 92 of sura 7 (*al-A'rāf*) and ends with sura 9 (*al-Tawbah*). The volume consists of 166 folios that are in excellent condition. It was finished on the 20th of Rabī' al-Awwal 628 A.H. The missing parts, which consist of volume 5 and part of volume 6, affect sura 5 (*al-Mā'idah*), sura 6 (*al-An'ām*) and the first 91 verses of sura 7 (*al-A'rāf*).

Maḥmūdīyah 103 (M103)

Volume 7 of the copy starts with the commentary on sura 10 (*Yūnus*) and ends with sura 16 (*al-Naḥl*). With 218 folios this volume is the largest in size among the surviving volumes. It is also the most impeccably preserved; there is virtually not one word that is missing, blotted or erased, a painful reminder of how the work looked when it was preserved in its entirety. Ironically it is on the cover of this volume that one of the buyers of the set recorded that he bought it incomplete (9 out of 13 as he puts it). Thus the loss occurred before the

copy became the property of al-Maḥmūdīyah college. On the last folio there is a *nasta'liq* Persian sentence that records the content of the volume. It is clear that the work has been in the possession of a Persian speaking owner. It seems likely that the work was in Persia at some point and eventually made its way to Medina. This volume was finished on the 2nd of Dhū al-Qa'da 627 A.H.

Maḥmūdīyah 105 (M105)

M105 is volume 11 of the original set and consists of 203 folios. Volumes 8, 9, 10 are missing. This brings the total number of missing volumes to four. It is a grave loss indeed. M105 covers sura 39 (*al-Zumar*) to sura 52 (*al-Ṭūr*). The title page is missing and the first page is damaged, with only half the lines remaining. The damage occurred before the manuscript was presented to the Maḥmūdīyah library. The volume has undergone some restoration. Four folios (180-183) have been replaced by a different handwriting. Apparently the folios were damaged at some earlier time and were copied by a conscientious owner. Otherwise the copy is in excellent condition and very well preserved. The scribe finished copying it on the 14th of Shawwāl 626 A.H.

The missing volumes 8, 9, 10 comprise the commentary on sura 17 (*al-Isrā'*) to sura 38 (*Ṣāḍ*), a span of 22 suras. Thus the loss affects 24 and a half suras. In my research I have filled this gap with copies from other collections, notably from Istanbul collections.

Maḥmūdīyah 106 (M106)

The 12th volume consists of 213 folios which continue the commentary on the Qur'ān from sura 53 (*al-Najm*) to sura 74 (*al-Muddaththir*). The title page has suffered considerably, although the title and author's name are still legible. This volume is very well preserved. There is some bookworm damage on the edge of some pages but this has not affected the text. The volume was finished on the 13th of Rajab 626 A.H.

Maḥmūdīyah 107 (M107)

The 13th volume of the set has 195 folios and covers the commentary of sura 75 (*al-Qiyāmah*) to sura 114 (*al-Nās*). With it the work

and the Qur'ān come to an end. This volume is very well preserved. However, at some time during its history the binding must have come undone since the folios are not in order. The colophon states that the scribe finished copying this volume on the 15th of Jumādā al-Ūlā 626 A.H. at his town al-Fayyūm of Egypt.

The total number of folios of the nine volumes comes to 1697, a staggering figure. The original must have been around 2500 folios.

Garrett Collection, Princeton no. 2217 (P2217)

The volume has been catalogued by Rudolf Mach in his *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts (Yahuda Section) in the Garrett Collection, Princeton University Library*.²⁰ Judging from the suras it covers, this volume must have belonged to a 26-volume set of the work.²¹ This would make it one of the most bulky of the copies of *al-Kashf* known to us. With only 11 lines per page, and 10 words per line, the manuscript has a clear, large, vocalized, and exquisite script that is an excellent example of medieval production. The work unfortunately covers only suras 91–114, yet it is an important witness of the work since it is older than M by at least 26 years and the scribe was exceptionally careful in his work. It is also an unexpurgated copy of the work, with the full *isnāds*. Most probably it was produced in Baghdād, since the scribe calls himself 'the Baghdādī'. The manuscript has punctuation marks in the form of small red spheres. There are no marginalia, only the addition of missed words after the proofreading. The scribe has proofread the whole volume, which is clear from his statement on the margins every ten folios: *balaght 'arḍan bi-aṣṭiḥi*.

Velīyuddīn Efendi (VE) nos. 130–133

This is the only complete copy of *al-Kashf* that I was able to locate. All the indications are that this is the only complete copy extant. As such this copy is invaluable. It consists of four volumes. The script is late *naskhī* scholar script, clear and readable. There is some

²⁰ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 30: ff. 184. 254 × 177; 180 × 100 mm. 11 lin. Jum. II, 600. Scribe: Muḥammad b. Yahyā b. 'Ubayd Allāh al-Baghdādī.

²¹ The volume covers suras 91–114, or half the quantity in M107.

irony in the fact that the only complete copy of *al-Kashf* is also the youngest copy ever. It was copied in 1186/1772, an exceptionally late date for this work. Most of the copies I have examined stem from the sixth to the eighth century. Preliminary investigation was not conclusive in shedding light on VE's origins. I was thus unable to ascertain the relationship of this copy to the other copies in Istanbul. Further study is needed to establish the stemma of the work.

The volumes are rather bulky, at least 350 folios each. The text is framed in a golden frame. That must have added considerably to the cost of the work. Luckily, the handwriting is consistent. Each volume is supplied with a table of contents. There are at least three *ex libris* stamps on the title pages of each volume. The copy is supplied with only one colophon located at the end of volume four. The four volumes amount to 1677 folios. Each page consists of 25 lines.

Velīyuddīn Efendi 130 (VE130)

This volume covers suras 1–5. It consists of 488 folios. The copy has been proofread carefully. There are marginalia for missing words or lines. Moreover, the scribe has consulted other works and copied relevant quotations from these works in the margins.

Velīyuddīn Efendi 131 (VE131)

Volume two covers suras 6–17 and consists of 355 folios. This volume contains a rather substantial number of quotations from a spectrum of works. Many of the works I have not encountered before, and it will be a worthwhile project to identify the authors as part of a study of the texts read by scholars around 1772.

Velīyuddīn Efendi 132 (VE132)

This volume covers suras 18–39. There are 383 folios in this volume.

Velīyuddīn Efendi 133 (VE133)

The fourth volume spans the last section of the Qur'ān in 442 folios. The colophon states that the copier finished on a Saturday, 15 of Muharram, 1186 A.H. The scribe is Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad known as 'Arbaḳī Pasha. The nickname is Ottoman and most probably the scribe was resident in Istanbul.

Topkapı Sarayı, Ahmet III, 76/2-4

This was originally a four-volume copy. The first volume has gone missing. There are indications that this copy was at the base of the VE, yet I have to carry out a more systematic analysis before issuing a definite verdict. The scribe is a Yemeni Zaydī scholar, a certain Ḥusayn b. ‘Abd al-Bāqī al-Zāhir. The script is rather awkward yet legible. Each volume is supplied with a colophon and it is clear that the work took more than two years to copy, from 1000–1001/1591–1592.

APPENDIX TWO

TEACHERS OF AL-THA‘LABĪ

The teachers of al-Tha‘labī according to the list given in al-Muntakhab

1. Muḥammad b. al-Faḍl b. Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Khuzaymah b. al-Mughīrah, Abū Ṭāhir al-Sulamī (d. 387/997). He is described as the major transmitter of ḥadīth in Nishapur (*muḥaddith Naysābūr*). His importance lies in the fact that he transmitted many traditions from his grandfather, apparently an important transmitter in his own right. He started teaching ḥadīth and transmitting it publicly in 368/978. (*Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā*, v. 16: 490–491 henceforth *SA*; *Tārīkh al-Islām*, volume of years 381–400, 157–158 henceforth *TI* (381–400)).
2. Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Mihrān, Abū Bakr al-Naysābūrī (d. 381/991). A quranic transmitter of variant readings (*muqrn*) and author of a book on the same topic entitled, *al-Ghāyah fī al-qirā’āt*. Al-Ḥākim reports that he was the leading reader among his peers (*imām ‘aṣrih fī al-qirā’āt*). His importance as a quranic reader is reflected by the fact that he has an entry in the biographical dictionary of Ibn al-Jazarī: *Ghāyat al-nihāyah fī ṭabaqāt al-qurrā’*. There we read that Ibn Mihrān has written many books on the science of quranic readings besides the one already mentioned; among them are *Madhhab Ḥamzah fī al-hamz*, *kitāb al-maddāt*, and *kitāb al-shāmīl*. He also seems to have written a biographical dictionary on quranic readers entitled: *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-qurrā’*. His works were still available as late as the time of Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429). There it is stated that he was the teacher of the teachers of both al-Wāḥidī and al-Baghawī. Al-Jazarī states that he died at 86. The importance of Ibn Mihrān is also reflected by the fact that he has a substantial entry in Yāqūt’s *Muḥjam al-udabā’*. There we find the titles of other works; they all deal with quranic sciences. (*SA*, v. 16: 406–407; *TI* (381–400), 27–28; *Ghāyat al-nihāyah fī ṭabaqāt al-qurrā’* (henceforth *GQ*), v. 1: 49–50; *Muḥjam al-udabā’*, v. 3: 12–15).
3. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Zakarīyā, Abū Bakr al-Shaybānī al-Jawzaqī (d. 388/998). A transmitter of traditions who

authored several books on the topic among which are: *al-Muttafiq al-kabīr*, and an *arbaʿūn* collection (a collection of forty traditions). He died at the age of 82. (*SA*, v. 16: 493–494; *TI* (381–400), 175–176).

4. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ʿUthmān, Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī al-Ṭarāzī (d. 385/995). A quranic reader (*muqriʿ*) and transmitter of variant readings. He also has an entry in Ibn al-Jazarī's biographical dictionary. (*SA*, v. 16: 466–467; *TI* (381–400), 111; *GQ*, v. 2: 237).

5. Al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Makhlad b. Shaybān (or Sinān) al-Makhladī al-Naysābūrī, Abū Muḥammad (d. 389/998), a transmitter of traditions in Nishapur. (*SA*, v. 16: 539–541; *TI* (381–400), 180).

6. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ʿUmar al-Zāhid, Abū al-Ḥusayn b. Abī Naṣr al-Naysābūrī al-Khaṣṣāf (d. 395/1004). A transmitter of traditions who would eventually become one of the few survivors with an *isnād* that connects to a generation of deceased transmitters (*ʿulūw al-isnād*). (*SA*, v. 16: 481–482; *TI* (381–400), 312–313).

7. ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Ibn al-Rūmī, Abū Muḥammad (d. 393/1002). A transmitter of ḥadīth. (*SA*, v. 16: 471; *TI* (381–400), 286).

8. Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Naṣrī. I was unable to identify him. He might be al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Aḥmad b. ʿAlī Naṣr al-Nuṣayrī al-Ṣawwāf al-Naysābūrī (see *al-Siyāq*, 182 no. 495).

9. Yaḥyā b. Ismāʿīl b. Yaḥyā b. Zakarīyā b. Ḥarb, Abū Zakarīyā al-Ḥarbī (d. 394/1003). A transmitter of tradition who was also a littérateur. He was trustworthy, albeit with a hint of heresy (*ʿalā bidʿatin fih*). Despite that propensity people had recourse to him and transmitted from him, because of the fact that he lived to an old age (and thus able to have a high *isnād*, the *ʿawālī* phenomenon again). (*SA*, v. 16: 543–544; *TI* (381–400), 306–307).

10. ʿAlī b. Aḥmad, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1007), a transmitter of tradition. (*TI* (381–400), 360).

APPENDIX THREE

LIST OF NON-EXTANT SOURCES USED IN *AL-KASHF*

The order of the titles is alphabetical and is based on the list prepared by Goldfeld. The title is given first, then some biographical information whenever that is deemed useful, finally the bibliographical references, mainly to Sezgin's *GAS*. An asterisk (*) before the number indicates that the work is extant in manuscript form but has, to my knowledge, never been published or studied. In this Appendix the Arabic *tafsīr* will be used to refer to a Qurʾān commentary.

1. *Kitāb al-Anwār* by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Miqsam, Abū Bakr al-ʿAṭṭār al-Muqriʿ (d. 354/965). A grammarian and exegete, who authored different works on lexicography and Qurʾān commentary. Sezgin does not mention that *Kitāb al-Anwār*, which was highly praised by medieval biographers, was quoted in *al-Kashf*. See *GAS* v. 8: 158.

2. *Tafsīr ʿAbd al-Malik b. Jurayj*, the full name of the author being: ʿAbd al-Malik b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Jurayj (d. 150/767). This *tafsīr* was also used by al-Ṭabarī. See *GAS*, v. 1: 91.

3. *Tafsīr Sufyan b. ʿUyaynah* (b. Maymūn al-Hilālī). The author was a *muḥaddith*, exegete, and jurist (d. 196/811). Al-Ṭabarī did not use this *tafsīr*. See *GAS*, v. 1: 96.

4. *Tafsīr ʿAbd Allāh b. Wahb al-Qurashī*. An Egyptian scholar who studied with Ibn Mālik; he died in 197/812. See *GAS*, v. 1: 466.

5. *Tafsīr Abī Bakr Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ʿAbdūs* (d. 396/1005). A sheikh of al-Thaʿlabī and a scholar of literature and *fiqh*. Al-Thaʿlabī is apparently the only scholar who used his *tafsīr*, which was never completed (*amlāh ʿalaynā ilā raʾs al-khamsīn min Sūrat al-Baqarah fi miʾatin wa-arbaʿin juzʿan thumma ikhtaram min dūnih*, Goldfeld, 51). The citation in Ḥājjī Khalīfah is a direct quotation from the introduction of al-Thaʿlabī and thus unhelpful. See *Tārīkh al-Islām* (*TI*), 381–400, p. 337.

*6. *Tafsīr Abī Bakr b. Fūrak* (d. 406/1015). An Ash'arite theologian and exegete who was the leading figure in Nishapurian theological circles. His Qur'ān commentary has apparently never been used by other commentators except by al-Tha'labī, who heard it directly from the author. There exists only one volume of the work in Istanbul, which has never been studied. See *GAS*, v. 1: 610–611.

7. *Tafsīr Abī Hamzah al-Thumālī*, Thābit b. Dīnār (d. 150/767). A Shi'ite Qur'ān commentator whose work has been lost. Al-Tha'labī is apparently the only later authority to quote from his Qur'ān commentary. See *GAS*, v. 1: 531.

8. *Tafsīr Abī al-ʿĀliyah and al-Rabīʿ* (al-Rabīʿ died in 139/756, while Abī al-ʿĀliyah died in 90/708). This Qur'ān commentary has been also utilized by al-Ṭabarī. The *tafsīr* is not extant. See *GAS*, v. 1: 34.

9. *Tafsīr Abī ʿAmr al-Furātī*. A contemporary of al-Tha'labī who authored a Qur'ān commentary that was used only by al-Tha'labī since no other reference to the work has ever surfaced. The entry in *Kashf al-Zunūn* is taken directly from al-Tha'labī and thus useless. See *Kashf al-Zunūn*, v. 2: 352 (correct Goldfeld, p. 51).

*10. *Tafsīr Abī al-Qāsim b. Ḥabīb* (d. 406/1015). I have already dealt with this author in Chapter One.

11. *Tafsīr al-Ashajj* (d. 257/871). His full name was ʿAbd Allāh b. Saʿīd b. Ḥusayn al-Kindī, Abū Saʿīd. A *muḥaddith* and exegete who was quoted by al-Bukhārī and Muslim. His Qur'ān commentary was used only by al-Tha'labī. See *GAS*, v. 1: 134.

12. *Tafsīr al-Aṣamm* (d. ca. 190/805). The full name of this commentator is ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Kaysān, Abū Bakr. He was a famous Muʿtazilite whose *tafsīr* was the foundation for the Muʿtazilite Qur'ān commentary tradition. His work is lost, like most of the early Muʿtazilite works. See *GAS*, v. 1: 614–615.

13. *Tafsīr Jibrīl* by Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim b. Aḥmad al-Māwardī (d. 422/1030). A theologian, jurist, and exegete, who was renowned in his time. Sezgin does not mention him, and there seems to be no trace of his many works, which were described as "*mashhūrah*" (famous). See *al-Muntakhab*, 35–36; and *Tarīkh al-Islām*, 421–440, pp. 92–93.

14. *Tafsīr al-Ḥasan* by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728). This Qur'ān commentary was heavily used by al-Tha'labī and thus could be a good candidate for reconstruction. The work was transmitted from

al-Ḥasan by the Muʿtazilite ʿAmr b. ʿUbayd (d. 144/761). See *GAS*, v. 1: 30, 591–594.

15. *Tafsīr al-Rāzī* (lived in the 3rd century). The author's full name is ʿIsā b. Abī ʿIsā, Abū Jaʿfar. Apparently a controversial fellow whose transmission was not well trusted. He is reported to have transmitted *al-manākīr* (outrageously strange reports). His *tafsīr* has only been used by al-Tha'labī. See *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, v. 12: 56–57.

16. *Tafsīr Rawḥ* (d. 205/820). His full name is Rawḥ b. ʿUḇādah b. al-ʿAlāʾ al-Qaysī. His Qur'ān commentary was available to al-Tha'labī in two recensions. Sezgin is unable to ascertain whether al-Ṭabarī used him or not. See *GAS*, v. 1: 39–40.

17. *Tafsīr Zayd b. Aslam* (d. 136/753). Sezgin seems unaware that al-Tha'labī used Zayd's *tafsīr* and that it was quoted extensively. See *GAS*, v. 1: 405–406.

18. *Tafsīr al-Suddī* (d. 128/745). Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Karīmah was an important Qur'ān commentator who was heavily used by later exegetes. See *GAS*, v. 1: 32–33.

19. *Tafsīr Saʿīd b. Mansūr* (d. 227/842). His Qur'ān commentary was apparently used only by al-Tha'labī. See *GAS*, v. 1: 104.

20. *Tafsīr Shibl* (d. 148/765). His full name is Shibl b. ʿUḇād al-Makkī, Abū Dāwūd. His Qur'ān commentary was used by al-Ṭabarī as well. See *GAS*, v. 1: 35.

21. *Tafsīr al-Ṣaḥābah* by Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim b. Aḥmad al-Māwardī (d. 422/1030). See entry no. 13 in this list for more information on this author.

22. *Tafsīr al-Ḍaḥḥāk* (d. 105/723). His full name is al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim al-Hillālī. One of the most important early commentators, his *tafsīr* was heavily used by later exegetes. Al-Tha'labī used four recensions of his work (Sezgin is only aware of two recensions). See *GAS*, v. 1: 29–30.

23. *Tafsīr ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Kīshshī* (d. 249/863). Apparently only al-Tha'labī used his *tafsīr*. See *GAS*, v. 1: 113, Sezgin gives al-Kissī instead of al-Kishshī.

24. *Tafsīr ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥāmid* (d. 389/998). A teacher of al-Tha'labī and the author of an extensive Qur'ān commentary that was compared to al-Ṭabarī's in size. We know little about this man, and

none of the biographical dictionaries mention that he was a commentator. See *TI*, 381–400, pp. 182–183; *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfiʿīyah al-kubrā*, al-Subkī, v. 3: 306–307.

25. *Tafsīr 'Aṭā' b. Abī Rabāḥ* (d. 114/732). The commentary of 'Aṭā' was used by both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī. See *GAS*, v. 1: 31.

26. *Tafsīr 'Aṭā' al-Khurasānī* (d. 135/757). His full name was 'Aṭā' b. Abī Muslim Maysarah al-Khurasānī. Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī used his commentary. See *GAS*, v. 1: 33.

27. *Tafsīr 'Aṭā' b. Dīnār* (d. 127/744). His *tafsīr* was used by both al-Tha'labī and al-Ṭabarī. See *GAS*, v. 1: 32.

28. *Tafsīr al-Firyābī* (d. 212/827). Only al-Tha'labī used his Qur'ān commentary. See *GAS*, v. 1: 40.

29. *Tafsīr Qabīṣah* (d. 215/830). Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī used his Qur'ān commentary. See *GAS*, v. 1: 40–41.

30. *Tafsīr Qatādah* (d. 118/736). His full name is Qatādah b. Dī'āmah b. Qatādah al-Sadūsī. He was used by both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī. Al-Tha'labī used four recensions of the work. See *GAS*, v. 1: 31–32.

31. *Tafsīr al-Qurazī* (d. 118/736). The full name of this author is Muḥammad b. Ka'b b. Sulaym. See *GAS*, v. 1: 32.

32. *Tafsīr Muḥammad b. Ayyūb* (d. 294/906). A native of al-Rayy and author of a work on *faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, which is still extant. Only al-Tha'labī seems to have used his *tafsīr*. See *GAS*, v. 1: 42.

33. *Tafsīr al-Musayyib* (d. before 250/864). Apparently an unreliable transmitter with a bad reputation among scholars of ḥadīth. None mention that he has a *tafsīr* and Sezgin does not have an entry for him. See *Lisān al-Mizān*, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalanī, v. 6: 38–39.

34. *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Ḥayyān* (d. ca. 150/767). A Qur'ān commentator, historian, and *muḥaddith* whose commentary was used by both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī. See *GAS*, v. 1: 36.

35. *Tafsīr al-Nabī* by Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim al-Faqīh. On him see no. 13 in this list.

36. *Tafsīr al-Nahdī* (d. 240/854). One of the sheiks of al-Bukhārī, whose Qur'ān commentary was used by both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī. See *GAS*, v. 1: 41.

37. *Tafsīr Hushaym* (d. 183/799). His full name is Hushaym b. Bashīr b. Qāsim al-Sulamī. A teacher of Ibn Ḥanbal, his Qur'ān commentary was used by both al-Tha'labī and al-Ṭabarī. See *GAS*, v. 1: 38.

38. *Tafsīr al-Wāqidi* the only information about him is found in Ḥājji Khalīfah's *Kashf al-Zunūn* in which two variants of the name are given. Apparently only al-Tha'labī has used this work. See *Kashf al-Zunūn* v. 2: 382.

39. *Tafsīr Warqā'* (d. 160/776). The full name of the author is Warqā' b. 'Umar b. Kulayb al-Shaybānī al-Kūfī. Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī used his commentary. See *GAS*, v. 1: 37–38.

40. *Tafsīr Wakī'* (d. 197/812). His full name was Wakī' b. al-Jarrāḥ b. Mulayḥ. Only al-Tha'labī seems to have used his commentary on the Qur'ān. See *GAS*, v. 1: 96–97.

41. *Sab' al-Naqqāsh* (d. 351/962). Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. Ziyād was a quranic reader who was also a commentator. Al-Tha'labī is apparently the only one to preserve his work. Al-Naqqāsh has a bad reputation among ḥadīth scholars for his transmission of *manākīr* (outrageous traditions). See *GAS*, v. 1: 44–45.

*42. *Kitāb al-Ghāyah* by Ibn Mihrān (d. 381/991). On him, see Appendix 2 no. 2. See also *GAS*, v. 1: 15.

43. *Gharīb al-Akhfash* (d. 215/830). Better known as al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ, his name is Sa'īd b. Mas'adah al-Mujāshī'i. The full title of the work is *Gharīb al-Qur'ān*. Apparently only al-Tha'labī used this work. See *GAS*, v. 8: 80.

44. *Gharīb al-Mu'arrij* (d. 195/810). Only al-Tha'labī has preserved this work. See *GAS*, v. 8: 60–61.

45. *Gharīb al-Naḍr b. Shumayl* (d. 203/819). Only al-Tha'labī has preserved this work. See *GAS*, v. 8: 58–59.

46. *Qirā'at al-Anṣārī*. I was unable to find any information on this author.

47. *Qirā'at Abī Ḥatīm al-Sijistānī* (d. 255/869). Sezgin does not mention a work with such a title for this author. Thus it seems only al-Tha'labī used this work. See *GAS*, v. 8: 93–96.

48. *Qirā'at Abī 'Ubayd* (d. 224/838). This work is also not mentioned by Sezgin. See *GAS*, v. 8: 81–87.

49. *Qirā'at Abī Mu'ādh* (d. 211/826). His work was also used by al-Azharī in his *Tahdhīb al-lughah*. See *GAS*, v. 1: 12.

50. *Qirā'at Khalaf* (d. 229/844). One of the ten famous quranic readers, and apparently only al-Tha'labī used this work before it was assimilated into the literature of *qirā'āt*. See *GAS*, v. 1: 12.

51. *Qirā'at al-Qutay'ī* (d. 253/867). Only al-Tha'labī seems to have used this work. See *GAS*, v. 1: 13.

52. *Qirā'at Harūn* (d. 249/863). An untrustworthy transmitter, whose work was only preserved by al-Tha'labī. See *GAS*, v. 1: 316.

53. *Kitāb al-Mubtada'* by Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 110/728 or 114/732). This work has not been preserved, and Sezgin does not state to what extent it has been preserved by other authors through quotations. He does mention that al-Tha'labī used it. See *GAS*, v. 1: 305–307.

54. *Mushkil Qur'ub* (d. 206/821). Muḥammad b. al-Mustanīr was a student of Sibawaih, and a Qur'ān commentator, whose work was not preserved because of his Mu'tazilī leanings. Al-Tha'labī is apparently the only one to preserve material from his scholarly work on the Qur'ān. See *GAS*, v. 8: 61–67.

55. *Ma'ānī Abī 'Ubayd* (d. 224/838). Apparently only al-Tha'labī has preserved material from this work. See *GAS*, v. 8: 81–87.

56. *Ma'ānī al-Kisā'ī* (d. 189/805). The work was used by both al-Azharī and al-Tha'labī. See *GAS*, v. 8: 117.

57. *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* by Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Yasār al-Madanī (d. 150/767). The work consisted of three sections, *al-Mubtada'*, *al-Mab'ath*, *al-Maghāzī*. The work was eventually edited by Ibn Hishām. See *GAS*, v. 1: 288–290.

58. *Kitāb al-Nazā'ir* by 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Wāqid (d. 211/826 or 212/827). The biographical dictionaries do not mention works for this author. See *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, Ibn Ḥajar, v. 7: 308.

59. *Kitāb al-Naẓm* by al-Ḥasan b. Yaḥyā b. Naḍr al-Jurjānī (d. 263/876). See *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, al-Dhahabī, v. 1: 147.

60. *Kitāb al-Waḍīḥ* by 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak al-Dīnawarī (d. 308/920). On this work and the author, see Andrew Rippin, "Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās and Criteria for Dating Early Tafsīr Texts" in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 47–50; see *GAS*, v. 1: 42.

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